My Baby Mama Is A Loser

Episode 2 - The Finale

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Quan Millz

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Have you read Episode 1?

Before you proceed, please make sure you read Episode 1 of **MY BABY MAMA IS A LOSER**. If you haven't read Episode 1 yet, click here.

A Note From Quan Millz

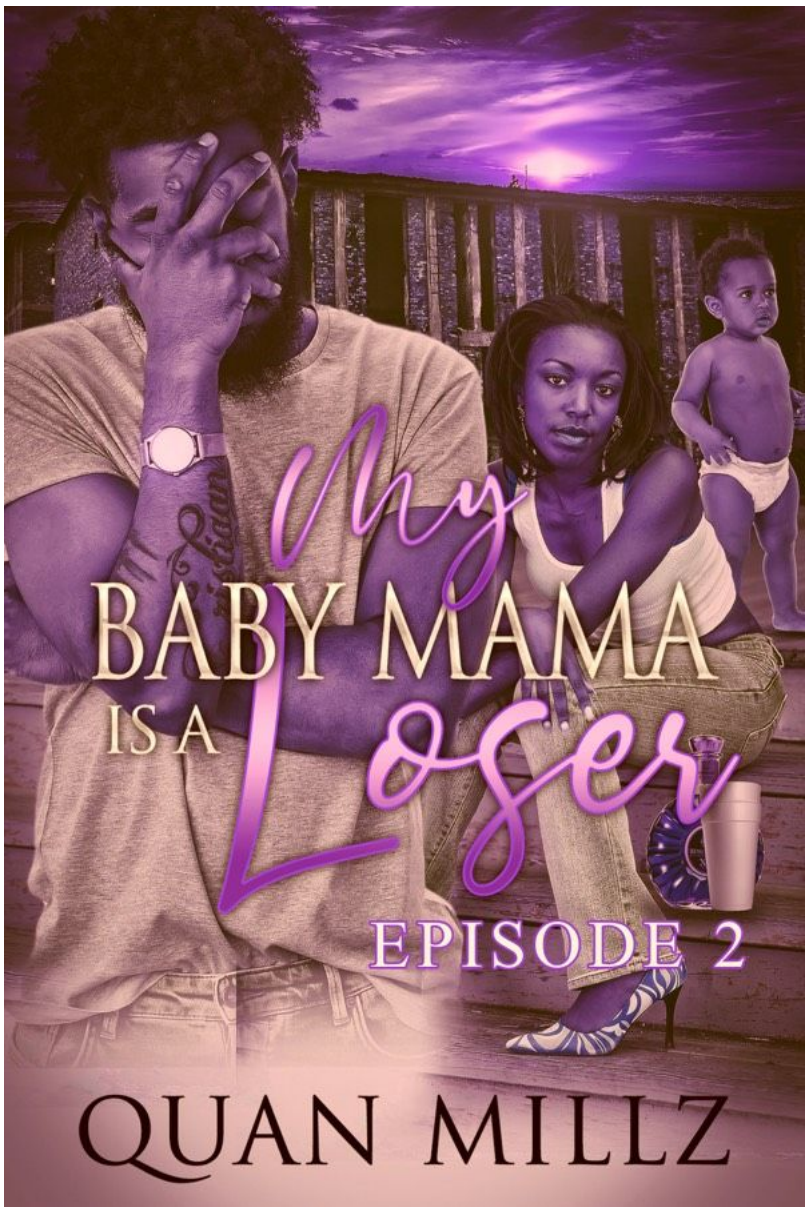
This box set includes the following books:

- Episode 2 of My Baby Mama Is A Loser
- Project Hoe Dreams
- This Hoe Got Roaches In Her Crib
- My Boyfriend Beats Me But I Still Love Him

Except for Episode 2 of My Baby Mama Is A Loser, the rest of the books are **completed** series. Enjoy!

Best Regards,
Quan Millz

My Baby Mama Is A Loser - Episode 2



Chapter One

"BITCH, I'MMA KILL YOU!" Dre screamed, lunging at me. Without hesitation, he threw his hands around my throat.

"No! No! Please, stop Dre!" Dre's mother screamed and cried, trying her best to pull him off of me. Still sitting on the living room couch, I was now pinned down with all of Dre's weight. Choking me as best he could, I attempted to punch his grip off my neck but he didn't relent. I kept yelling and crying, I was seconds away from passing out. I kicked and punched him, but my blows were like throwing grapes at a giant. Dre was hellbent on killing me. I virtually had no energy to muster up a fight. If his mama didn't succeed in pulling him off of me I knew I was going to for sure die tonight.

"DRE! GET OFF HER! PLEASE STOP!" his mother continued as she tried to yank him off me.

"I'M GONNA KILL THIS BITCH!" Dre continued, tightening his grip around my slender throat.

Suddenly, he let me go and exploded into rage. "AHHHHHH! I SWEAR TO GOD YOU BETTER NOT BE FUCKING WITH ME, BITCH!" he screamed as he paced in the living room floor, his fists clenched. He then dashed to an adjacent wall and started punching it, damn near putting a hole in it.

"DRE! CALM DOWN!" he mama cried and begged once again, running over to him to attempt to stop him from hurting himself.

"GET OFF ME, MA!" he yelled into her face. He then threw his attention immediately at me. "GET THE FUCK OUT NOW, TRISH! LIKE FOR REAL! YOU GOT FIVE SECONDS TO GET YO STUPID ASS OUT OF HERE OR I WILL FOR REAL KILL YOU!"

Crying uncontrollably, I got up from the couch and limped over to him. "Dre! Please, just listen to me! I don't know for sure if you are or not the father! Please just calm down!" I tried to plea with him.

"Just leave, Trish. Just get the fuck out of my house. I told you not to come over here with no mess and this is what you do. Get the hell out now before I call the mothafuckin' cops, you nasty ass bitch!" his mama growled as she ran up on me, ready to beat my ass well.

I buried my face into my hands. "Ca-ca-can I just se-see Ariyanna

one more time?" I inquired stuttering, tears streaming down my face and into my palms. I pulled my palms away and stared at Dre's mama who was now standing inches away from me. She, too, looked like she was no ready to fuck me up.

"GET YO MOTHAFUCKIN' ASS OUT OF MY HOUSE, BITCH! Hell to the fuck no you can't see her!" his mama roared, pointing to her front door.

"Okay," I said as I grabbed my belongings off the couch and then grabbed my cane. Still crying and sniffling, I limped toward the front door and opened it. Before I headed out, I turned around, looked at Dre and said, "Dre, if you wanna make sure about everything, we should do a DNA test ASAP."

"GET THE FUCK OUT, BITCH!" his mama yelled again. Dre didn't even give me eye contact. He just stood there, frozen, tears running down his cheeks, his facial expression was flat.

"Sorry," I mumbled as I made my way outside and down her front steps. I quickly pulled out my phone, ordered an Uber and within minutes, someone came and got me.

~

Sitting in the backseat of the Uber, I contemplated everything that had just transpired. I know, I know, I know. This was truly all of my fault. I was responsible for this entire situation. I should've been more upfront with Dre from the very beginning and we could've avoided this entire fiasco.

Don't judge me (which I already know you were probably doing) but like you already knew, I had a past. A bad past.

When Dre and I were together, yes, there were plenty of times where I had cheated on him. I had only done so out of retribution.

Well, let me stop. That was a lie.

Yes, I was a hoe. A big one at that. And back then I had such a huge quench for nonstop sex. Even when Dre sexually satisfied me, I still had this knack to go out and mess around with other guys. It is what it is though.

Listen, I made my fair share of mistakes. Everyone has. But now that I was on the verge of dying, I wanted to make sure that I made amends with Dre and his family. Now that the cat was out of the bag, Dre had to know this secret before I went on to be with the Lord.

You might be wondering who the real father was. Shoulder shrug. Well, truth be told, I honestly didn't know who could've been Ariyanna's real daddy. Shoot, maybe there was a slight possibility it could very be Dre. However, around the time I got pregnant, I had slept with about ten or eleven men in total.

“How are you doing tonight?” my Uber driver asked, looking back at me in the rearview mirror.

“I’m fine,” I said as I threw him a quick, fake smile. I wiped my face and then stared back out of the window, taking in the Downtown scenery from the expressway.

“Is everything alright?” he asked. “You seem kind of sad,” the older Arab-looking man said in his thick accent.

“I’m fine…Thank you. I prefer not to talk on my rides,” I said.

“Sorry,” he replied and then threw his gaze back onto the semi-busy expressway.

Going back into my thoughts, I had to think about who could’ve possibly been Ariyanna’s father.

Let’s see…First, there was Dre. Then there was Mike. He and I went to high school together. There was Terry. Paul. Lil G. Lamont. Oh, and then Frank. I used to love me some Frank. He was this fine light-skinned dude who I knew since middle school. Then there were some other men I had messed around with who I met at the club or on Tinder but I didn’t know their names…Truthfully, it could’ve been more than ten men. During that time in my relationship with Dre, I was also having sex with a few guys for money here and there. Like I said, please don’t judge me. We all have a past. I know you did, too…

But listen, I didn’t want to ponder over my mistakes and all the relationships I had in the past. That was water under the bridge. I had to shake these thoughts away because that was exactly how Satan moved. Infiltrate your spirit and then have you almost wanting to renege on your faith. Now, I was covered in the red blood of Jesus. And I even made that known to Dre’s mama when I first got to her house. I told her how I found redemption and salvation sitting in that jail cell, almost rotting to death. And I wanted the opportunity to tell Dre about my change, too. Not that I was trying to get back with him anything like that. But I was beyond my past now, ready to make things right with everyone. My sole mission right now was revealing the truth about the possibility of Dre not being the father to Ariyanna.

Anyways, I was now headed back to Hope, still crying, quietly sobbing. Luckily, I wasn’t making a scene. I didn’t want this Uber driver to notice how messed up I was. I needed someone to talk to ASAP. Someone to give me consolation. And the only person who I knew who could help me get through all of this was once again Monique. Hell, she was the one who even encouraged me to call Dre’s mama.

I quickly pulled up her contact info in my phone and dialed her. Within seconds she picked up and answered with, “Hey, girl! How you feelin’?”

“I ain’t doin’ too well…,” I said.

"What happened? You called Dre's mama?"

"I did…In fact, we talked and I went over to her house. I just came back."

"Oh, no! What happened?"

"Dre came over with Ariyanna…"

She gasped.

A minute later, my Uber driver pulled up the roundabout of Hope. By now the sun was setting now, darkness began to cover the skies. "Hold on for a second, girl, I'm about to get out of my Uber ride…," I told Monique. I looked at the driver and said, "Thank you, sir." I got out and then walked over to an empty bench near the building entrance's awning. "Okay, I'm back," I said to Monique.

"Girl, what happened?"

"Well, I went over there to see Ariyanna. Dre's mama and I talked for about a good hour before he came home. Soon as he saw me, he started to flip out."

"Why?!?"

I closed my eyes and exhaled. Truth was, Monique didn't know the secret I was keeping either. "Girl, please don't judge me when I tell you this but I don't think Dre is Ariyanna's father...," I confessed.

"WHAT?!?!? Girl, what in the hell are you talking about??!?"

"Sis, I don't know if Dre is actually Ariyanna's father. I hadn't told anyone about this 'cuz at the time I was just a mess. When I got pregnant, I just wanted the baby to be Dre's 'cuz out of all the dudes I was messin' with at the time, Dre was the one who had his stuff together."

"Oh, no, bitch! You have to go to be mothafuckin' kidding me right now! What the fuck is wrong with you?!? And you even lied to me!"

Quickly going back into a frenzy of tears, I clamped my mouth and shook my head. "I'm so sorry, Monique. I was too embarrassed to tell anyone about this. Please don't judge me!"

"Bitch, get the fuck off my line. You're a lying ass bitch! Chadwick was right! Said all of this newfound Christianity of yours is some fake ass shit! Bitch, you ain't a real ass woman! How could you keep a lie like this to yourself! You're fucked up! I don't even know why I continued to be friends with you all this time. That is some low-life ass loser shit for real, girl. Ughhh! So Dre was just taking care of another nigga's kid all these years?!?! What the fuck is wrong with you?!?!? Why wouldn't you tell him that!"

"DON'T CURSE AT ME!" I screamed, still crying frantically.

"Bitch! FUCK YOU! GOODBYE! Don't call me no more! Fucking liar!" Suddenly Monique hung up.

"AHHHHH!" I suddenly burst into tears, drooling and slobbering as intense pain overcame me. I just lost a friend. WOW! This was way

too much!

Sitting on the bench, I rocked back and forth wondering what I was going to do next. Numbness overcame me and I briefly contemplated running back to my room and downing the pills once again.

"Girl, what's the matter? You alright?" I heard a female voice say. I looked over my shoulder and lo and behold it was Donna.

Not saying anything, I kept crying and shaking my head no.

"What's wrong, sis?" she said as she sat next to me and held me.

"I…I…I won't be able to see my baby no more…"

"Shhh, shhhh. Come on now, let's get it together. Don't make a scene," she said.

"I'm dying and I won't be able to see my baby no more," I moaned.

"Come on, sweetie. Let's go somewhere else and talk about this. Your nerves are all bad," Donna said.

She grabbed me and we both stood up from the bench and took a walk away from the house and to a back alley behind the building. "Come on now, tell me what happened…," she said, wiping my face free of tears.

"My cancer is back big time and all I wanna do is just see my baby. I'm hurting right now. I don't know what to think," I said.

Donna raised her brow and then reached in her back pocket. She pulled out a pack of her pre-rolls, pulled out a joint and said, "You need this right now. You are too messed up. Just relax and forget about everything we talked about earlier."

Still crying, I shook my head no, but the truth was I needed something right now just to distract myself. "I can't," I cried. "I can't do that."

"Girl, you're gonna drive yourself crazy if you don't just relax. Stop playing now," she said as she took the joint, slapped it in her mouth and then pulled out a lighter from her pocket. She sparked up the joint, took a huge pull and then exhaled away from me. She then took the joint of her mouth and handed it to me. "Just take a few pulls and calm down. You're a wreck right now, LaTrisha. A lil weed ain't gon hurt you," she said.

I glanced down at the joint. Lord knew I was trying my hardest to resist. If I took that joint and smoked on it, I knew I was gonna get in trouble. But this pain was so intense, I felt like I was going to die from a broken heart right here and now.

Fuck it. A voice said in the back of my head. I took the joint out of Donna's hand and threw it in my mouth. I missed the smell of weed. Damn, and this joint was pulling so smoothly too.

Chapter Two

I really couldn't believe this shit. Like, I really couldn't. I was floored at the fact that first, Trish had the mothafuckin' audacity to bring her raggedy ass over to my mama's house and try to see Ariyanna. She knew good and goddamn well that she wasn't legally allowed to do that. Second of all, even if she wanted to see Ariyanna, she should've taken her ass down to the family judged and filed a motion to see her. Let the fucking courts intervene and force me to let you see Ariyanna, bitch.

Sitting on my mama's couch in her living room, my head was buried in my sweaty palms. I had been crying my heart out now for over an hour.

"It's gonna be okay, Dre…Come on now, stop all of this crying," mama consoled as she rubbed my back trying to get me to calm down.

"Mama, I can't! I can't calm down. Didn't you just hear what she said?!?! My baby may not be mines!?!? What the fuck is she even talking about??!?"

"I know, sweetie. I know…I'm so sorry I even let her come over here. I don't know what in the hell I was thinking. I mean, she called me up with that sob story. At first I didn't wanna hear shit from her. I was so mean to her when she first called me. But my conscience began to eat me alive and I had to quickly call her back. I didn't want that type of guilt on my heart and soul if she were to pass away suddenly," mama explained.

Not saying anything, I just stared off into space, still in disbelief. I wasn't going to believe. No. NO! Hell no! "Man, I swear, mama. Ariyanna has got to be my kid. She looks and acts just like me!" I exclaimed. Some minutes later, Ariyanna came creeping around the corner and then ran into my lap.

"Why you cryin', daddy?!?" she asked. I guess she didn't hear that crazy ass fight Trish and I just had. She must've been deep up in mama's room watching the hell out of cartoons or something. Thank God.

"I'm just upset…That's all, sweetheart," I said as I cracked a smile, taking an intense stare at my baby girl. Ain't no way in the hell she

wasn't mine. She had mostly all of my features. Her smile. Her eyes. Her hair. All of it belonged to me.

"Don't be sad, daddy! I love you!" she said, cracking open a big smile. Just seeing her flash that wide grin, exposing her tiny teeth, just made my heart crack wide open even more. I had such deep love for this girl that I was willing to kill and die for her. I mean, wouldn't any noble man do the same for their seed?

"I know, baby girl! I know!" I said grinning back, wiping my face free of tears.

She leaned in and gave me a tight hug. "Don't cry! Let's play with my toys!" she screamed, beaming angelic innocence.

Mama looked at me and said, "We just gotta do the right thing, Dre. I know this is all hard to take in. It really is…Especially considering the other stuff you got going on with that other woman. But the right thing you need to do right now is calm down, get some rest and then eventually take a test just to make sure," mama said.

"Yeah, you right…," I replied standing up. I picked up baby girl and planted a kiss on the side of her face.

Mama stood up and then said, "I mean, I am so confused myself. When Trish first got pregnant, why in the hell didn't you take a DNA test? You just assumed the baby was yours??!?!"

Damn..She was right. I didn't take a DNA test. Shit, truth be told, it never crossed my mind. "I don't know…I just assumed she was mines. I mean, I just assumed Trish wasn't out there like that. And the timing and everything made sense," I said. "I mean, mama, I trusted her. I never even cheated on her."

Mama lowered and shook her head. "I told you that girl was no good. I really told you all of this. But oh well. Look, I hope once all of this mess is settled and done, you truly stop messing around and find someone with a solid head on their shoulders. Now is not the time to even think abou getting into no new relationship with nobody. You just need to focus on raising your children, your job and finishing school. You got too much good stuff going on. You got your own place now. You got a car. Good credit. Dre, your only downfall, son, is your weakness for women. And no good women at that. Let all of this be a life lesson. Keep ya dingaling in your pants," mama said as she walked deep into the kitchen and cracked her fridge open. "I need me a damn drink after this damn day dealing with you young kids. I swear ya'll gonna give me a stroke."

"I'm sorry for all of this, mama," I said as I made my way past the kitchen. "I'm gonna figure everything out. I promise."

~

Some days had passed.

It seemed like every day that went by, I became more and more shallow and cold. Between finding out that I now had a son with Shelly and then consequently finding out that Ariyanna may not even be my kid, I just had to get away from all of the madness. I had to take some more time off from my job just to go through a reset. Besides, school was starting to become increasingly difficult and I had this major exam coming up for this crazy ass international economics class that I was taking.

It was Friday evening. I asked mama if she could watch Ariyanna for the weekend while I studied for this exam. Currently, I had a B- in this class. I kind of slipped up a bit over the last few weeks and ended up getting a D- on this last quiz I took a week ago. Professor Horowitz told me that I needed to pull off at least a 90 or higher in order to get at least a B+ in the class, so I was on top of it now.

For the past hour or so, I had my head buried in this thick ass textbook reading about international trade policy with China. I had been sitting in the living room, my books and shit splattered all over the place. Since I wasn't the type of nigga who needed music to study, not a single sound could be heard in my place. But boy, lemme tell you, I was seconds away from passing the fuck out! Not only was I distracted from my own incessant thoughts thinking about all of this baby mama drama, but this material was boring as fuck! But I knew I had to absorb all of this material if I was going to pull of 90 on that exam.

"In 1984, The Chinese Government than expanded its relations with the United King—"

Ding Dong! Ding-Dong! Ding-Dong!

All of a sudden, I paused reading aloud the text and my eyes shot toward my front door. My doorbell was ringing off the hook. "The fuck?!?" I groaned as I threw my book to the side and got up from the couch, quickly sauntering over to the front door. The doorbell kept going off, almost as if whoever it was on the otherside was in some sort of emergency or playing with my fucking doorbell.

"Yo! I'm coming!" I screamed. Truth be told, I should've had my blickie on me in case these were some fool ass niggas trying to rob me. Lately, my neighborhood had been victim to a string of robberies and home invasions. So, I'd be damned if I was gonna let some niggas try to stick me up. But I didn't know where my gun was at and besides it was a bit late.

Once I got to the door, I peeped out the peephole and saw Candreka standing in front of the door, still frantically ringing the doorbell. Like from side to side as if she was running from someone, she began ferociously banging on my door as she kept ringing the

doorbell.

“Candreka?!? What the hell!” I growled and immediately opened my front door.

“DRE! Please! You gotta help me! Tanisha is gonna kill me! PLEASE HELP ME! PLEASE!” she screamed as she pushed past me and hid in a corner near my kitchen.

Confused yet slightly nervous, I looked out the hallway and saw that Tanisha was no where to be seen. What the fuck was Candreka on?!? Quickly closing the door, I dashed through my living room toward the corner where she was hiding. “What the fuck is wrong?!?” I asked as I scanned her up down. And. Oh. My. Mothafuckin’. Goodness’. Candreka’s ass was tore the fuck up. Bitch looked like she got stomped on by some niggas. I leaned down and grabbed her swollen, bloodied face. I didn’t notice her face at first when she stormed into my townhouse. “Yo! What the fuck?!?!? Tanisha did this to you?!?” I asked.

“Yes! She’s crazy! She’s gonna kill me!”

Chapter Three

Damn, damn, damn. Donna was right.

Lord knew I needed that hit of weed.

As the THC entered my bloodstream, I could immediately feel relief and relaxation come over me. This feeling was like none other. Baby! I felt like I had felt like I had already died and walked straight through the gates of heaven. Although my tender lungs had gone some time without smoking weed, they were still used to the thick smoke.

For the past hour or so, as Donna and I puffed on that joint, we chatted about all the craziness I just endured while we were still in the back alley. I had damn near forgot about all the drama I just went through earlier in the day.

"You want another hit?" Donna asked as she took the joint of her mouth and handed it to me. We were now on our second joint and the munchies were starting to kick in.

"Sure," I replied. "I'm kind of hungry though."

"Let's finish this and then go back inside. Maybe we could order a pizza since the kitchen is probably closed already for the night," Donna said.

"Okay, cool," I said, grabbing the joint from her fingers. Before I slapped the joint between my lips, I paused for a moment and wondered if I was doing the right thing. My guilty conscience began to kick into high gear. "Damn, I can't believe I'm doing this."

"Doing what?" she asked.

"Smoking this joint," I said nervously. "But I feel…I feel so good right now," I confessed. My gaze was heavy. I just knew my eyes were visibly red. Although Donna told me we were smoking on something called an Indica, which gives more of a body high, I felt so light on my feet.

"Well, if you feel so good, then why are you nervous? Girl, just stop being so paranoid," she said.

Suddenly my guilt fled away. Donna was completely right. And she was right earlier when she mentioned the cocktail of drugs the doctors had put me on. All of the pain medicine my doctors had been loading me up on was nothing compared to weed. Those Vicodins gave me

bad headaches when I came off of them. Sometimes I'd get the chills or a bad fever if I skipped a few days of not taking them.

I told myself time and time again that I would never ever put another blunt or bottle of alcohol up to my mouth, but now I was questioning that stance. *Nonsense*. Hell, if I was dying, I at least deserved to have something to give me peace of mind and body relaxation. This weed was definitely doing the job and I knew weed wouldn't make me feel like I was coming off a hard drug once I stopped.

"This is so different from what I'm used to smoking," I said after I got done taking a toke and passed the joint back to Donna.

"Hell yeah! This is straight from a medical dispensary. You ain't gonna get this on the streets," she said.

"Damn, for real? So, it's very different from what I used to smoke on the streets?"

"Hell yeah! Girl, this is lab-created by some white folks. That stuff you used to smoke got all types of pesticides and shit on it," she laughed as she finished the joint. "Anyways, you really need to go talk to Pastor Shirley and tell her what's going on and go see if you could get you a medical marijuana card."

"Damn, I might just have to do that," I said. I couldn't believe this. These past two years I swore I was going to change everything around and here I was, feeling like I was back to square one. But then again, not really. Guilty conscience was poking and prodding me to just stop and walk my behind back into the House and shake this devilish nonsense off. But, the more the weed set in, the calmer I became, the better I felt. Truthfully, I ain't felt this way in quite some time. The pulsating migraine I had earlier seemed to dither away. And the pain that would come from time to time in my hip from my surgery melted away like butter in the microwave.

"Anyways, girl, I am sure eventually everything will work in your favor. And also, girl, you really need to talk to another doctor. Have you thought about getting a second opinion? I mean, I know you probably like your doctor and all, but sometimes doctors don't know everything. You should see what other types of alternative treatments you could get," Donna said as she blew the last remaining smoke out of her mouth into the cold wind blowing outside.

Damn, I actually hadn't thought about going to a different doctor. I didn't even know if I could even do that. I was technically on Medicaid and I didn't even know if the State would allow me to go and get a different doctor.

"That sounds good and all but I don't know…If I ain't got that much left to live, I don't wanna risk and go to a different doctor. I mean, I don't even know if I'd be able to pay for it," I said.

“Girl, don’t worry about all that. Shoot, I can help you! There are plenty of resources you could probably look into! Girl, we live in Chicago, not Tupelo, Mississippi! I am sure it’s some people out here in the city who could give you some alternative treatments!” Donna exclaimed as we began exiting the alleyway, making our way back to the front entrance of the building.

“Well, we’ll see…I mean, for right now I just wanna focus on seeing my daughter. At this point, I don’t even know if I care anymore about living,” I confessed.

Suddenly, Donna who had been walking by my side, stopped dead in her tracks and then tugged me into her embrace. She looked me dead in my eyes, her gaze intense like a heart attack. “GIRL! DO NOT SAY THAT! You know you do not mean that!” she explained. “You gotta remain positive! The doctor didn’t say you were gonna die tomorrow!”

All of a sudden, tears escaped from the corners of my eyes and I lowered my head out of fear. “I don’t know, Donna. This is just a lot. I mean. This is such a crazy life. I’ve been praying forever for a change and it seems like nothing is working. Like damn, is God even real?”

“Oh, girl Please stop it! Yes God is real! But at the same time, you can’t just be nilly willy about all of this. Stop being some pessimistic. Look, I’m gonna help you. Your doctor is gonna help you. Once we sit down and talk to Pastor Shirley, the *real* Pastor Shirley, she’s gonna help you, too!”

“Girl, how are you so sure about all of this?”

“Just trust me! Now come on! Let’s go inside and start doing some research on how we can find some other treatments and stuff. I’m not gonna let my sister just succumb like this. We’re gonna fight to the very end!” she said, a big smile stretched across her face.

“Okay,” I replied nonchalantly. Damn, it was so crazy how I had a sudden, unexpected change in friendship. I lost one friend and gained another in a matter of an hour. Truth be told, with the interaction Donna and I had earlier, I didn’t even think a friendship with her was possible. But for the last hour or so, she proved to be more informative and hopeful about my situation than Monique and even Neicy. Granted, deep down, I still felt so bad about lying to Monique about everything. And although Neicy and I were now cool, I still to this day blame her to a degree for even getting up in my business with Dre. Then again, maybe all of this had to happen for a reason. If Neicy didn’t butt her way into my business, I probably would’ve still been out there on the streets.

After we walked inside, we checked back in with the security guard. Funny thing was, although we reeked of straight weed, the security guard didn’t even care.

"Let's go see if Pastor Shirley is in her office so we can talk to her ASAP about everything," Donna said. "I think I saw her Benz out front."

"Okay…But damn, don't you think we should put on some spray or something or change out of these clothes?"

Donna looked at me and rolled her eyes. "Girl, please. Stop tweakin'. I'm telling you. Pastor Shirley is *cool.*"

"Girl, I don't know…This just seems so…I don't know. I don't know about all of this," I said as I began to become very suspicious and doubtful all over again. It was like on one hand I truly wanted to trust everything Donna was telling me. I mean, she really had no real reason to lie to me. I barely knew her. She barely knew me. A part of me was telling me to go ahead and have faith and trust in the Lord. *This woman was obviously put into your life for a reason*, I thought to myself. But another part of me, the inner street *nigga,* in me was very much doubtful. My intuition kept telling me something wasn't right. But then again, my intuition had been off so many times, I truly didn't know what to think anymore.

"Look, do you want my help or not? I'm kind of going out of the way to help you. I ain't got no real reason to lie to you," Donna said.

I froze and then stared at her, not able to say anything back.

She raised a brow. "Well? So what you gon' do?"

"I'm sorry. Let's go. I'm tripping," I replied, a nervous smile stretched across my face.

By now it was nearly nine pm and most of the house activities were over. Everyone had to be in the rooms by ten pm for bedtime. Pastor Shirley's office was on the far end of the building on the first floor. I'd been in there a few times.

Some minutes later, Donna and I arrived at Pastor's office. Donna then knocked twice.

"Come in," Pastor Shirley said inside of her office.

Donna then looked at me and scanned me up and down with this slightly devilish grin. She opened the door and walked in. Following behind her, at first I didn't see Pastor Shirley since I was standing directly in front of Donna. But soon as Donna moved out of the way, Pastor Shirley was sitting at her desk with a big black bonnet sitting on top of her head as she filed her nails. Some young, skinny dark-skinned guy with dreads, looking no older than thirty, was sitting in front of her desk, looking like he was rolling up weed. What in the hell was going on?!?

"Just the chick I wanted to see," Pastor Shirley said, not giving me any eye contact.

"Huh?" My face twisted into confusion. Donna spun around and looked at me shaking her head. That same devilish grin returned to

her face. “You’s a dumb ass bitch,” she laughed.

“Wait! No! No! I didn’t do nothin’,” I yelled to Pastor Shirley.

“Hoe, it’s too late!”

Chapter Four

"Yes! She's crazy! She's gonna kill me!" Candreka cried, clasping her battered face.

"Oh my God! Where is she?!?! Do you know where she went?" I asked, my heart thumping out of my chest.

"I don't know where she's at!" Candreka cried.

"Why the fuck you came over here?!?" I angrily asked.

"I don't know! You were the first person I could think of who was closest to where we stay!"

With no idea what was going on, I damn near feared for my life as well! This shit was crazy as hell! What in the fuck did these two really have going to make my cousin beat her girl's ass this way! And I didn't even realize cuzzo even had it in her to do this type of damage. All the years I'd known my family, never once did I ever see her get into a fight, let along damn near kill someone. Granted, Tanisha had some tom boyish ways, but she wasn't the type to fight broads nor niggas. If anything, she acted like a straight up female. She could run her mouth and be passive aggressive but she wasn't the type of chick who would put hands on another person.

"I don't know where she's at!" Candreka cried.

All of this shit was totally unbelievable. A part of me for a split second thought perhaps Candreka was lying. Shit just seemed too shady.

"Why would she do this to you!?!?" I asked as I leaned down and helped her off the ground. *Call Tanisha, Dre. Somethin' ain't right. This bitch is lying. Something suspect as fuck!* I thought to myself

Shivering like was one some dope, she stared at me with her eyes bugged out as if she'd seen a ghost. "I…I, ummm…I…"

"You what?!?"

"I got pregnant…"

Suddenly my face twisted with surprise. "You got pregnant?!?!? Huh?" It took me a moment to process what the fuck she just said. "I thought yo ass was a lesbian!?!?"

"I am! But I fucked dudes from time to time!"

"Shit! What the fuck?!?!? How did she even find out?!?! Why

didn't you just abort the damn baby?!?"

"I was going to but she went through my phone and saw the text messages I was getting from the dude."

"What dude?!?! What the fuck, bruh!?!?! What is REALLY going?!?" I stood back, shaking my head. None of this shit was adding up. "I think I need to call Tanisha to see what the fucking real story is. None of this is making sense!" I quickly pulled out my phone, ready to dial up Tanisha, but before I could do so, Candreka shot up from the corner and tried to grab the phone out of my hand. "DRE! PLEASE, NO! PLEASE DON'T CALL HER!"

Knock! KNOCK! KNOCK!

"WHERE SHE AT?!?!? I KNOW THAT BITCH IN THERE! Open up this goddamn door!"

"Shit! She knew you came here?!?! What the fuck?!?!?" I yelled, looking at Candreka with shock. But she was just as shocked. "OH MY GOD! FUCK! She knew I came here 'cuz I forgot we both got GPS trackers on our iPhones!"

"Damn!"

Tanisha kept pounding at my front door, damn near ready to bust that shit down. "Open up this mothafuckin' door, Dre! I know she in there! You got my bitch pregnant! I KNOW YOU DID! I know it was yo fuckin' ass!"

Suddenly I stood in my place not able to move. "Fuck she talkin' 'bout?!? I got *you* pregnant?!?" Hell nah! Shit, even though I would've loved to fuck the shit out of shorty, I definitely didn't get this broad pregnant. No sir! Not even in my wildest dreams, especially considering that crazy ass dream I had earlier when I passed out at their crib some days ago. But damn, maybe that dream turned out to be some weird premonition.

I didn't know honestly what to do next. "I gotta see what she want, Candreka! I can't just let her stand there! She gon grab the attention of my neighbors! Shit, the police probably already on their way!"

"No! NOO, Dre! Please, no!"

"Man, look! This my cousin! I know I can talk to her. This just all one big ass mistake. And besides, whatever the fuck you two got going on, I don't want no parts! And I definitely gonna clear my name in this shit!"

"Dre! Please, no! She's dangerous!"

Smacking my teeth and looking shorty up and down, I said, "Nah, this family. She ain't gonna do shit to me."

Candreka suddenly shoved past me and dipped down the hallway.

"Where you going?!?" I asked but then I ran to my door and looked out the peephole. My eyes widened with fear though when I saw Tanisha standing there with a big ass gloc in her right hand.

“DRE! OPEN UP THE DOOR! I SWEAR I’MMA KILL THAT BITCH!”

“YO! What the fuck is you doin’, Tanisha?!?! Nigga, what is you smoking?!?”

“DRE! OPEN UP THE GODDAMN DOOR! SO YOU THE NIGGA WHO WAS FUCKING HER, HUH?!?! THAT’S WHY SHE RAN HER ASS OVER HERE!?!?”

“NAH! Hell nah, cuz! I don’t know why the fuck shorty came over here! But you need to put that gun away before the cops come and see you! Girl, you know you in fucking Hyde Park. These white folks gonna call twelve with the swiftness!”

“DRE! That no good bitch fucking broke my heart! That bitch is no good! And I thought we was family! You fucked my wife, Dre! You out of all people!?!?? Really?!? You?!?!?”

“Bruh! You tweakin’ the fuck out right now! I ain’t did shit with shorty!”

Tanisha and I kept going back and forth, right at my damn door! Cuz was definitely bugging but I knew one thing for sure, I definitely wasn’t going to open that goddamn door!

“Yo! Bruh, you need to calm the fuck down and go home! You with the shits and you ‘bout to go to jail!”

“DRE! PLEASE! JUST OPEN THE DOOR! I WANNA TALK TO HER!” Tanisha screamed and cried, waving the gun all over the place.

“Nah! I ain’t gonna do that, Tanisha!”

Out the corner of my eye, I could see Candreka come down the hallway and hide behind a corner. I glanced her way and told her silently, “Go back to the room. She got a gun!”

Then, blue lights began to pierce inside of the living room through the windows. Twelve was now on the scene. One of my neighbor’s probably just called the cops, just like I expected.

I looked back into the peephole and said, “See, cuz! The fucking police are here now!

“Fine! FINE!” Tanisha screamed, still waving the gun. “Ya’ll gonna regret this shit! All the shit I did for you mothafuckas! And this is how you repay me?!?!”

Tanisha then stormed off and then went out into the middle of the street, approaching the police officers. I flew into my living room and then pulled my blinds up to see what the fuck was about to happen next. Once again, from the corner of my eye, I could see Candreka catiously make her way back into the living room and then she stood next to me. “What is she doing?!?” she cried.

“I don’t know! Damn!” I replied angrily.

Two squad cars were right in the middle of the street, their lights filling the darkness outside. Suddenly, one of the officers hopped out the car, a gun hoisted in his hand was aimed straight at cousin.

“Ma’am! Put the gun down and put your hands up in the air!” the middle-aged looking white cop screamed.

Tanisha was completely silent, but she kept walking toward the two cars, the gun still in her hand. It was as if she didn’t hear a damn thing the officer said. Then she spun on her heels and looked straight into my townhouse’s living room window. The blinds were fully open now and she could see Candreka and I standing next to each other.

“Man, bruh! WHAT THE FUCK ARE YOU DOING?!?” I screamed, throwing my hands up. I was now getting so nervous cousin was about to do something so stupid and unthinkable.

“Please, baby! Just put the gun down!” Candreka begged, crying and shivering next to me.

“I LOVED YOU! YOU BETRAYED ME!” Tanisha screamed, looking dead at the both of us as we stood there silent and unmoving. This was like some scene out of a movie. Like straight from Set It Off. Within seconds, three more CPD squad cars arrived on the scene and without hesitation, two more officers jumped out of their vehicles and had their pistols aimed straight at Tanisha.

“Ma’am! I’m not gonna say it again! Put the fucking gun down NOW!” the same officer screamed.

Tanisha then spun on her heels.

“I can’t sit here and watch this! She’s about to do something stupid! I just know it!” I exclaimed. I had to go out there and dissuade her from trying to do some stupid shit. Fighting the urge, something told me not to go, but I had to. This was my cousin! My favorite cousin at that. We were so close, we were almost like brother and sister, so I couldn’t stand to see her put herself in this crazy ass situation. Not even a second passed and I suddenly dashed to my front door, hoping I had enough time to get out onto the street and talk some sense into cousin’s head.

POW!

POW! POW! POW!

“NOOOOOO! AHHHHHHHH!” I heard Candreka scream.

Guess I was a second too late. By the time I opened the door, I saw Tanisha laid out in the street.

“NOO! What the fuck did ya’ll do?!?!” I suddenly exploded into rage.

“GET BACK, SIR! STAND THE FUCK BACK!” one of the officers yelled at me, aiming his gun straight at my chest.

“That’s my cousin! Ya’ll killed my cousin!” I screamed, now uncontrollably crying. Candreka ran outside, and she too was crying and screaming.

“She raised her gun at me!” one of the officers said.

A crowd began to form outside on the sidewalk. One of the officers

sauntered over to Tanisha's lifeless body and then kneeled down and picked up the gun she was carrying. Carefully examining it, he shook his head and then muttered, "This is a fucking BB gun!"

Chapter Five

"Ma'am!"

"Ma'am!!!!"

"Hellooooooo!!! Ma'am!"

"Please wake up! I'm at your destination!"

Suddenly, my eyes shot open at the sound of my Uber driver's voice. Staring back at him, I didn't know how long he had been trying to get my attention.

"Are you okay?" he asked me, looking very concerned.

I didn't know what time it was or how long the man had been trying to get my attention. After I left Dre's house, I got into my ride, popped my medicine and dozed off.

"Yeah, ye-yeah, I'm fine. I just took my medicine a little bit too early and I passed out. I'm sorry about that," I apologized. "I'mma leave you a tip on the app."

"Thank you very much. Enjoy the rest of your night, ma'am," the driver said. I quickly gathered my belongings and then made my way out of the car. By now it was definitely dark outside and I had a good hour to get inside to check in.

I couldn't believe I passed out in the back of that man's car and had such a vivid dream, really nightmare, about smoking weed with Donna and then getting into some mess with Pastor Shirley. That was probably God speaking to me, telling me that Donna was definitely no good and that I needed to stay away from her as much as possible.

Although I knew I dreamt that craziness while I was in the backseat of the Uber, I still on the edge. That dream felt so real. So, making my way up into the front of the building, I quickly looked around to see if Donna was lurking around the corner. And she wasn't. Thank the Lord.

After I walked inside the building, I checked in with the security guard and then made my way back to my room. Although I was a tad hungry, the kitchen was already closes. I could've ordered some take out, but I wanted to make sure I was on my Ps and Qs when it came to my diet. Dr. Pirtle wanted me to make sure I still ate my fruits and veggies and stay away from fried foods. That takeout was nothing but

the devil, so I'd just fast for the rest of the night and make sure I got a nice lil breakfast in the morning after prayer.

Nonetheless, I was still so devastated about everything. Yeah, truth be told, I should've been more upfront with Dre and his mama about the reality of Ariyanna's paternity. But hey, that was water under the bridge. I said what I had to say and I was truly determined to make the situation right. Oh, and as far as Monique, my bestie, not knowing about who Ariyanna's father was. Well, honestly, she was the only person who knew the truth. And that was also I was something I was grateful for. She never judged me about the mix-up. Although from time to time she told me I should've pressed for a paternity test just to verify everything, the reality was I didn't want to go there. That would've been a bad thing to do.

Why?

Well, there was another secret that I was keeping from everyone.

There was also a possibility that Chadwick, Monique's now fiancée, could've been the father.

PLEASE DO NOT JUDGE ME!

It was just a mistake. I swear to God it was.

Although now I considered myself a saved and sanctified woman of God, there was one thing that I was going to for sure take with me to my grave. And that was that truth. Now I understood fully why God gave me that dream in the back of that Uber. Hell, if I would've called up Monique and really confessed to her the possibility that Chadwick was one of many suspects, she would end our friendship. Hell, she might try to kill me.

Once I got back into my room, I changed out of my clothes and put my pajamas on. This entire situation with Dre was bothering me so much, especially considering that at the end of the day that probably wasn't even his child. If I was going to die, I deserved the right to see my child and if Dre wanted to take it there, now I was gonna be forced to do something I knew would get under his skin. I was gonna fight to see my baby, meaning, I was now gonna get the courts involved. If Dre wants to play that game with me and deny my right to be around my baby, well, I can play that game.

Now in my pajamas, I got down on my knees and said a prayer. I asked the Lord to continue to give me guidance and assurance that everything was going to be okay. That everything was gonna work out in his holy favor.

Chapter Six

Two weeks later…

"Amazing Grace, how sweet the sound. That saved a wretch like me!" An older black lady poured her heart out, singing that familiar gospel tune at the side of Tanisha's golden brown casket at the cemetery.

Sitting directly in front of my cousin's casket, I was a total wreck. So many tears flooded my face. Mama was sitting to my side holding Ariyanna.

Some moments later after the singer got done singing, some workers from the cemetery came over and began to lower Tanisha's casket into the ground. Holding a single rose in my hand, I stood up and threw the rose on top of her casket. Man, I still couldn't wrap my head around any of this mess. I couldn't believe my cousin, my sister really, would go out like this. All over Candreka's shady ass. Thank God I never acted on my impulses and tried to make a move on her nasty ass. Something always told me this bitch was shady as fuck.

Speaking of the mothafuckin' devil…

As I looked over my shoulder, I saw her standing several feet away. She was by herself, dressed in some tight-fitting black dress. Some shades adorned her face. Holding her arms by her elbows, she just stood there and watched the casket make its final journey into the muddy pit.

I glanced over at her, wiping my face free of tears and sweat. On this Saturday in Chicago, it was exceptionally hot and sunny outside today, which kind of sucked because the weather was so nice. In fact, it brought me back to memories with Tanisha. Usually this time of the year, she'd be hosting all types of kickbacks and barbeques at her crib.

Still staring at Candreka, I almost had it in me to run up over there and choke the shit out of her. This was all her fucking fault. She fucked around on my cousin, got pregnant by some nigga and then cousin decided to take her own life. Well, she technically didn't take her own life. She let the muhfuckin' jakes do it. Apparently, she had raised her gun up and almost aimed it at the officer who shot her. Crazy thing was I believe she knew what she was doing. She knew had a BB gun on her and she knew the cops would mistakenly think it was a real gun. Truth be told, I think the one thing that really blew my mind was to also find out that cousin was high as fuck that night. When the county morgue did an autopsy and some toxicology tests on her, they discovered she had lethal amounts of cocaine and meth in her system. *Like damn, Tanisha, what the in hell did Candreka do to you*

to make you go this crazy?!? I wondered to myself, still debating whether or not I should go over there and cuss that bitch the fuck out.

After Tanisha got killed that night, Candreka hadn't been seen or heard from in quite some time…until today. I thought she wouldn't come to the funeral but it looked like she felt like she had to pay her last respects. Bitch.

Calm down, Dre. Don't do it. It ain't worth it. Don't do cousin like this, my mind ruminated, trying so hard to dissuade me from making a big ass scene at the cemetery.

Quickly looking away to distract myself, I then turned my attention back to my mama and Ariyanna. "You ready?" I asked her.

"Yeah…I'm ready," she replied in a nonchalant tone. She, too, wasn't dealing all too well with this fucked up situation. Tanisha was almost like a daughter to her, so from the moment she found out what happened, she was completely devastated. I reached down and grabbed Ariyanna from out of mama's lap and then the two of us followed the rest of our family members back to the road where limos, the hearse and other cars were parked.

"Dre…," I heard a familiar female voice say from behind me. I turned around, holding Ariyanna.

It was Trish.

I froze for a second and tightened my lips. I had to look up to the blinding sun in order to make sure I wasn't hallucinating. What in the FUCK was she doing here?!?

I looked back down and she was now a few feet away from me. Damn! How long had she been here?!? I wondered. I didn't see her at the church nor did I see her in the crowd moments earlier.

"What are you doing here?" I asked and then looked at my mama. She looked ready to pop off, like she was ready to explode like a volcano in Hawaii. "I know you ain't coming here to my niece's funeral to start no mess!"

"No, Ms. Williams. I'm not. I'm just here to pay my respects. Tanisha and I were cool, too. I just thought I'd come by and say how sorry I am for everything. That's all," she said, then she smiled and waved at Ariyanna. "Hey, baby girl." Trish then limped off, using her cane for assistance.

Mama and I looked at each other. For a split second, once again, my anger almost came out, but then I realized that was a bit honorable for Trish to come out and show her support. And she wasn't lying. She and Tanisha were cool at one point in time.

A part of me felt somewhat bad seeing Trish in that condition. Although I was still mad as hell that she would come to my mama's house on that bullshit.

"You okay, broski?" I heard Myron, my best friend, say as he came

from behind me. I looked at him and said, “Yeah, I’m cool. Just didn’t expect Trish to bring her ass here.”

“Yeah, that was kind of foul…She on some other stuff, bruh,” he replied shaking his dread-filled head.

“Yeah, whatever…,” I responded, staring at her as she walked toward a car. Looked like she took an Uber to get here.

After we all headed back to our cars, we then made our way back to the church for Tanisha’s repast. It was like any ole typical black funeral repast. Old ladies served fried chicken, yellow rice with gizzards, collard greens and buttery pound cake to funeral goers.

Mama, Ariyanna, me and some other family members were sitting at a main table inside of the church hall munching away. I was feeding Ariyanna when suddenly I saw once again Trish enter the dining hall of the church. This time, her best friend, Monique was to her side. “I’ll be damned,” I mumbled under my breath, my eyes widened with slight anger. Monique was all drama, too. She was the type of bitch who put all types of crazy thoughts up into Trish’s head. Where in the hell did she come from? Man, see now something kept telling me these broads were up to no good.

“Mama, she came back here,” I said as I leaned into her side.

“Who did?” she asked. She wasn’t paying attention since she was chatting it up with one of my uncles.

“Trish…now she with Monique,” I replied.

“Hrrrm…Let them be,” she said.

With my eyes still glued to these broads, I just had a feeling that they were on some shady shit. Although, of course, I wasn’t talking to Trish, but damn, why didn’t she at least call me and tell me that she was going to becoming to my cousin’s funeral?!? If she knew her and I were already on thin ice as it was, she could’ve at least given me the heads up. Granted, she *didn’t* have to really tell me shit since she did know Tanisha and they were cool. But this was my family and she knew this. For a second, I even wondered how in the hell she found out Tanisha died. Then again, maybe word got around. Regardless, I had the urge to get up and confront her. And if anything, with paternity of Ariyanna being out there, I wanted to go ahead and nip that shit in the butt.

“Where are you going?” Mama asked as I began to get out of my seat.

“I’mma go talk to Trish. I just don’t like the vibes she’s giving me. She just gonna show up to the funeral and act like it’s all cool and whatnot. Something ain’t right,” I said.

“Dre, just sit down and leave them alone. I don’t want no mess today. Handle that craziness another time. Now is not the right time,” mama said.

“Mama, please. I know Trish. She might think she a changed woman now but I can sense her shadiness from a mile away. She’s up to something,” I explained.

“Whatever,” mama replied. “Give me my grandbaby and any mess you start, take it outside,” she said.

“I will,” I replied as I handed mama Ariyanna. I leaned down and pecked a kiss on the side of baby girl’s face. “Daddy will be right back,” I said and then strolled over to Trish and Monique. They were now standing in line, waiting to get served some food.

“What ya’ll doing here? Like for real?” I asked.

“What are you talkin’ about, Dre?” Trish asked, looking a tad perplexed at my question.

“Please, don’t’ play dumb with me. If you knew you were coming, why wouldn’t you call me?”

“She don’t owe you an explanation! Besides, you ain’t nothin’ but a bully!” Monique interjected. “You see the condition she’s in. You know what she got going on and this is how you decide to treat her?”

I smacked my teeth and looked Monique up and down, “Bitch, mind your own damn business!”

Suddenly Trish clasped her face. A few of the older women who were serving food heard me and looked at me as if I was smoking crack in front of their faces.

“Uh-uh! Not in here. Ya’ll need to take that outside!” one of the older ladies said. “This is a house of God!”

“Dre…You wrong for that,” Trish replied shaking her head. Damn, this bitch was really on some other shit now. I couldn’t believe she was gonna stand there and act like some holy roller. Bitch, I know all about your mothafuckin’ ass. You weren’t gonna be able to floss that shit on me now that you out of jail. Lying ass hoe. This Jesus shit was probably all a front anyways.

I couldn’t take it anymore. “We need to talk,” I said. “Let’s go outside,” I commanded as I grabbed her arm and try to pull her out of line.

“Get your hands off me,” she growled, pulling her arm back.

“Monique, come with me in case he gets flip,” Trish said.

“Oh, you already know I will!” Monique responded.

“Fine…” I walked off and the two bitches followed me outside into the parking lot of the church.

Once the coast was clear and no one was around, I looked at Trish and said, “So, what the fuck is really going on, breh? Like, you first gonna come to my mama’s crib unexpectedly and try to see Ariyanna knowing you weren’t supposed to do that. Then, you gon’ sit up there and try to run me some story about you dying and that I may not be the father to my child? You fuckin’ playing games with me. You

already know how angry I get!"

"Nigga, you ain't gon do shit!" Monique spat as she shoved Trish out the way and scanned me up and down. "You need to calm the fuck down before shit get really serious, bro. You not gon sit up here and talk to my best friend this way!"

"Man! I don't even know why the fuck you here! You need to mind your own business! Like I was doing, TAKING CARE OF MY DAMN DAUGHTER!"

"That's if she's even yours!" Monique spat back.

"Ya'll please stop it! This is not how I wanted to talk to you, Dre! Monique, I told you this was a bad idea!" Trish suddenly burst into tears.

"Man, whatever," I said smacking my teeth. "You used my cousin's funeral as an opportunity to come talk to me. You should've been woman enough to call me," I said.

"Dre! The last time I tried to talk to you, you damn near tried to kill me!" Trish screamed, tears still flying out of her widened eyes. "Remember?"

"Yeah, yeah, yeah! So what you want?"

"Dre! I am not playing. I am very sick and I think it's only right that you let me see Ariyanna and you need to take a test just to make sure she's yours! Please, we gotta do this before it's too late!" she begged.

"Nah! I ain't doing that. I got fully custody over *my* child. She's mine. I know it. Everyone knows Ariyanna looks just like me. So stop playing games, man. She has my personality and everything. And like I said, you technically not her mother no more. The courts took that right away from you. So, I suggest you two broads get on your merry way and leave me and family alone to grieve," I roared.

"Dre…Please…This ain't right. But if that's the path you wanna go down, this is for you," Trish said as she reached into her purse and handed me an envelope.

"What's this?" I said as I snatched the envelope out of her hand.

"Let's go, Monique. I'm done with him," Trish said and then the two of them walked off.

"What in the hell is this?" I mumbled to myself as I quickly opened the envelope. I pulled out a piece of paper and then began to read over it. "Dear Mr. Williams..You are here by notified by Cook County Family Court, Division #23, to appear before Judge Lynn Tolliver in regards to a motion filed by LaTrisha Johnson to establish joint custody…"

"WHAT THE FUCK?!?!?" This bitch just served me papers!

Chapter Seven

"WHAT THE FUCK?!?!?"

I heard Dre scream from afar as Monique and I took off as fast as we could, despite the fact that I was limping. But it seemed like with the adrenaline running in my system, my limp wasn't as debilitating as usual. With me just serving Dre those court papers, I just knew he'd use all of his speed and might catch up to us and try to inflict as much harm as he could. I just knew he would finally let loose and kill me. And probably even try to kill Monique.

"Come on, girl! Hurry up before he tries to run up on us," Monique commanded as got close to our Uber ride and then hopped in. "Take off, sir! Please! Someone's chasing us!" Monique told the driver. The older Mexican-looking driver quickly followed.

With my heart damn near ready to explode out of my chest, I couldn't believe Monique had persuaded me into confronting Dre in this manner. I was a bit apprehensive about doing things this way, but she told me it was the only best course of action to take to get Dre's attention.

The Uber driver sped off down the street and then we got onto Stony Island Avenue, the main thoroughfare not too far away from the church we were just at.

"I told you it would work!" Monique laughingly screamed, sticking her tongue out. "Mission mothafuckin' accomplished!"

Accomplished…

"Ughh,!" I groaned, rubbing the side of my head as a pulsating migraine began to pound my right temple. While Monique felt we accomplished something, I, on the other hand, felt a bit shady doing this to Dre. But truth be told, this was his fault. He was unreasonable and I felt like I had no other choice to take it there. I had to force my hand to at least get to see my baby.

"Girl, aren't you excited!" Monique roared.

"Yeah, I guess," I replied nonchalantly, staring off into the passenger window, still somewhat scared about that interaction. "But sis, I just know Dre is gonna go crazy now. Him and his no-good mama," I complained.

Monique smacked her teeth. “Girl, don’t worry about none of that. He ain’t gonna do shit,” she laughed. Glancing over at me, I guess she noticed that I wasn’t all too pleased how everything just suddenly went down. “I’m sorry I cursed,” she said. “I’mma do better.”

“I’m not mad about that actually. I’m just mad that I feel like I cornered Dre. Especially at Tanisha’s funeral. And especially considering how she died. Now my guilt is eating me alive. I don’t know if that was the right thing to do,” I said.

“Girl, you really overthinking all of this. Just relax. Besides, with no time left to lose, we don’t have time to get caught up thinking about Dre’s feelings. Was he thinking about yours when he put you through all of this drama?”

“No,” I replied.

“Was he thinking about you and your health when he tried to kill you a few weeks ago?”

“No.”

“Well, okay then. Don’t worry about it. So long as I’m around, trust me, he ain’t gonna do shit to you or me. I guarantee that, baby! And Chadwick ain’t gonna let a nigga try to put their hands on me. I know that for sure,” Monique explained, fumbling through her purse and then pulled out her cell phone. “Speaking of which, I need to see if bae want something to eat. I guess since you’re gonna be spending the weekend with us, what you want to eat?”

“Just a salad,” I said, still thinking about everything.

Damn…Monique was kind of right. To hell with Dre. I had to do what I had to do.

That night after I got back from Dre’s place and tried to explain to him the precarious situation we were all in, I realized that I had to take things a step further. I called Monique and told her exactly what went down and she formulated today’s game plan.

She told me she had a friend who worked as a paralegal for a nonprofit in Downtown that dealt with family issues. At first, I was doubtful a court would hear my petition to grant me visitation rights given my now ex-felon status and that I was currently staying in a halfway house. However, Gary, her paralegal friend, talked to his boss and then they got into contact with me and told me that a judge might show me some leniency given my grave health situation. The nonprofit said they would work pro bono on my behalf, so they immediately went down to a Cook County judge and filed a motion asking a judge to grant a hearing in regard to restoring my visitation rights and possibly establishing joint custody. I also told Gary about the possibility that Dre may have not been the father after all, so they said once we got to our hearing, they would ask the judge to mandate a paternity test to see if Dre indeed was Ariyanna’s father. And if he

wasn't, well, there was a good possibility that if I had gotten completely back on my feet by that point, I could gain full custody over baby girl.

Our initial plan was to try to corner Dre and serve him papers at his job or at school. But I didn't want to take things that far because I didn't want to make a scene for him at his job. Although I was bitter at him for putting me through all of this hell, it would've not been Christian-like for me to return that bitterness to him. Although expensive, we then decided to possibly hire a private process server to serve Dre those papers but then we found out Tanisha had died. That totally threw Monique and I off guard. I was going to back down from everything but then bestie said that we could probably go to the funeral, pay our respects and then serve him papers there. He wouldn't dare make a scene, she suggested. And I guess to an extent she was right even though it did seem like he was about to chase us down in that parking lot and murder us right then and there.

We were now on Lake Shore Drive, headed north back to Monique and Chadwick's place. I got permission from my probation officer and Pastor Shirley to spend the weekend with them. Truth be told, I felt kind of bad because deep down, there was still this huge possibility that even Chadwick could've been the father of Ariyanna. Lord knew I didn't have it in me to tell Monique that secret, so I tried my best to suppress that thought, hoping the Lord will forgive me and understand this predicament.

Thirty minutes later, we got to Monique and Chadwick's place and made our way upstairs to their apartment. We walked inside and Chadwick was sitting quietly on the living room couch watching television while he sipped on a beer.

"Hey, babe!" Monique announced as she trekked into the living room carrying my suitcase.

"Sup," he replied, not giving any of us eye contact.

"Hey, Chadwick," I said nervously then tightened my lips.

He looked over at us and then nodded his head and said, "Hey."

"You okay?" Monique asked. "Everything alright?"

"Yeah, I'm fine…" He took a sip of his beer. "How was the funeral?"

"It was sad. But it was a nice service. Tanisha looked so pretty in her casket," Monique said as she made her way into the kitchen. Honestly, I couldn't move. I just stood there in between the foyer and the living room, not knowing if I even had permission to sit down. Besides, I didn't even know if I felt comfortable sitting in the same space as Chadwick.

"Go ahead and sit down, Trish! Why you just standing there?" Monique said laughing as she ran some sink water and began washing

dishes.

"Sorry, I just was thinking for a second. Actually…I need to use the bathroom," I muttered. "I'll be right back." I then limped down the apartment hallway, needing to quickly calm myself down.

You know, years ago, I would've been able to ignore the obvious tension in the room and pretend like Chadwick and I didn't have anything going on. But now I was more conscious about my past decisions. I recently spent so much time thinking about all the madness I'd been through. Hell, I even contemplate the madness I put others through. So, none of this just sat right with my spirit.

Once I made my way into the bathroom, I pulled my dress and panties down and began to pee. While on the toilet, I closed my eyes and said a prayer, asking the Lord to show me through all of this.

"In Jesus name, I pray…Amen," I mumbled and then stood up.

Once I flushed the toilet and washed my hands, I made my way back out into the living room. Monique was now snuggled up next to Chadwick on the couch. "Have a seat, girl! Make yourself comfortable!" she said.

I nervously moved deeper into the living room and then sat down on the love seat.

"So, Chadwick wants some wings and pizza. The place we order from doesn't deliver, so I was thinking about running down the block to go get it."

"I'll go and pick it up," Chadwick said. "I need to get out of the house anyways."

"Nah, baby. You stay. I gotta go run some other errands," Monique interjected.

"Nah, it's cool. You've been out all day. Don't you wanna rest?" he asked.

"Yeah, I hear you, but I also need to stop by Jewel and Walgreen's to get some feminine products. I know you don't wanna have to pick those things up, do you?"

He thought for a moment. "Yeah, I guess you're right," he said nonchalantly.

"I'll go, too!" I beamed and was already ready to get up but Monique threw a look of concern. "Girl, no! You need to rest, too!"

"I'm fine, girl."

"No! You've been on your feet all day. You need to let your hip rest," she said as she kissed Chadwick on the cheek and then got up. "I'll be back in an hour or so. In the meantime, make yourself at home, Trish. Don't act like no stranger. Chad ain't gonna bite," she laughed as she made her way near the foyer. "Just give me a ring if ya'll need me to pick up anything else," she said.

"Okay," Chadwick replied.

"Okay," I replied as well.

Soon as Monique headed out of the door, I just sat back and kept my gaze locked onto the television. Awkward silence entered the room and all you could hear now was ESPN blaring from the hi-def television in the living room.

Not into sports, I pulled out my phone and then pulled up my Bible app. Lord knew I needed to read some of his holy word to keep my mind distracted from the tension.

"So you just gonna sit over there and not say anything?" Chadwick suddenly asked.

I glanced up and saw him looking dead at me, his eyes turned into penetrating slits.

"Hey," I responded nervously. "How you doin'?"

"Bitch, I told you the last time I didn't want your ass in my house or near my presence. And now you gon' snake your way back here?"

"Chadwick, it wasn't my idea to come over here. Monique begged me to stay the weekend. I had no other choice. I'm sorry," I fretfully said, my body beginning to quake with fear at the sound of the tension concealed in Chadwick's tone.

"Yeah. What the fuck ever," he replied shaking his head, his eyes still attached to the television. "You a lil lying ass, shady ass bitch. And fuck all of that holier than thou bullshit you on now. Fake ass hoe. Gon come up in my mothafuckin' crib and spend the night here. Raggedy ass hoe. I don't give a fuck if you dying or not," Chadwick growled. "Yo ass need to be rotting away in a jail cell."

"Chadwick, how could you say this? I ain't never did nothing so mean to you. What you and I had was the past. Just occasional flings. And remember, you came onto me. I ain't never pushed myself onto you."

"Bitch, fuck you," he spat.

All of a sudden, I grew angry. "I'll be damned if I'm gonna be disrespected. And for your information, you just as guilty as I am. Especially since you know there's a possibility Ariyanna might be your daughter," I spat back to him.

"What did you say?" his face twisted with confusion.

"Yeah, I said Ariyanna might be your kid."

"Oh, bitch, here you go again with your lies. Man, I was wearing a condom that night. And besides, even if the girl was mines, you weren't even woman enough to confront me. You raggedy ass, loser ass mother."

Suddenly Chadwick rose from his seat. I quickly grew nervous as to what he was going to do next. "I know you not finne put your hands on me!" I growled.

"Hell no. Bitch, you aren't even worth the kill. Look at you. Your

hair is falling out of your head. Your body is all shriveled up and frail. That chemo got you looking forty years older. Bitch, your skin is drier than a California raisin. Bitch, you're about to die, ain't no point in trying to kill you. If you do end up dead, which I hope you do, thank God Ariyanna is being taken care of by a nigga who got his shit together and not by some deadbeat nigga. And now that I think about it, I want you gone tomorrow. You can spend the night tonight but I want you out of my place tomorrow. If you don't, then I'mma tell Monique the truth about everything. And yeah, she'll be upset. But I'm a real nigga. I don't give a fuck if Monique breaks up with me. I can always find me a new bitch. But you on the other hand. What you got? A sister who barely likes you? Monique is the last person in your life who truly cares about you. Once that's gone you might as well be dead."

Sitting there in shock, I couldn't believe Chadwick would stand there and say those hateful, hurtful things to me. What in the hell did I ever do to deserve that type of verbal lashing?!? But to an extent, I realized he was right. I put myself in this situation and couldn't even be upfront with my own friend. And I knew if I told her the truth, she would disown me.

"Fine, you know what. You're right. In fact, I can just leave now. I don't think I feel comfortable being over here," I said.

"Yeah. You should've never felt comfortable in the first place, you raggedy ass bitch. See your way out my mothafuckin' door."

Swallowing my pride and fighting back tears, I mustered up my strength to get up from the couch.

"Before you leave, call Monique and tell her why you leaving, too. I wanna hear this lie you gon tell her since you not woman enough to tell her the truth about anything at this point, you loser," he said.

Shivering, a few tears trickled out of my eyes. I couldn't believe I was letting Chadwick have this much power over me but he was right. There was just no way in hell I could tell Monique the truth about what Chadwick and I had going on some years ago. And Chadwick obviously had nothing to lose at this point. I did. Monique was all I had left. Ariyanna was all I had left, too, but there was still a possibility a judge may not even take me seriously.

I pulled out my phone and dialed Monique. Within seconds, she picked up.

Chadwick looked at me and lowly mumbled, "Put her on speakerphone." I followed suit.

"Hey, girl! What's up! What you need?"

"Hey, girl, I hate to break it to you but I actually gotta head back to Hope. I got a call from my probation officer telling me that I gotta report back for a mandatory drug test. Also, Pastor Shirley wanted to

see if I could work some overtime this weekend since she was loaded up with revivals all weekend," I lied. "I really need the money, too, especially if I gotta get this apartment soon."

"What?!?!? What the hell are you talking about, Trish?"

"I know…I'm sorry. I'mma see if I can make my way back over here," I said wiping my face.

"Ughh! Trish! No! Come on, girl! Call them folks back and tell them this ain't right! You already made plans. Plus, we still got so much to talk about for the court hearing" she exclaimed.

"I know, I know, I know. But listen, sweetheart, these aren't my rules. And I gotta follow them to the tee if I don't wanna get in trouble," I lied once more.

Chadwick, still looking at me, produced this devilish grin and shook his head. "Pathetic," he muttered.

"Ok, well, it's cool I guess. Glad we had a chance to get Dre those papers though," she said.

"Yeah. True. But anyways, I'll holla at you later when I get back. I'll probably take the train back since it's right there. Save some money, I guess."

"You don't want me to order you an Uber?"

I looked at Chadwick and he gawked back at me. This look of disgust came across his face. "Hell no," he whispered in a dark tone.

"I got it, girl. Don't worry about it," I said. "You paid for enough stuff already."

"Alright, girl. Well, give me a call later," she said.

"Aiight, girl. Love you."

"Love you, too, girl. Stay safe," she said and then hung up.

I threw my phone back into my purse.

"Now see your way out my mothafuckin' house, bitch," Chadwick growled, pointing toward the front door.

"I wish you the best, Chadwick. May God open up your heart," I replied, wiping my face free of heavy tears.

"Yeah, whatever, hoe. Save that shit from this stupid ass jail bird hoes you live with. Now get the fuck out my shit," he said and then threw his gaze back onto the television.

I limped over to my suitcase, which was still standing next to the door near the coat rack. I grabbed it and headed out the front door and made my way down to the Redline train station. I was so ready to die right now. Like for real. I felt so horrible knowing Chadwick used our secret to manipulate me into leaving. And he was successful. I knew what he was trying to do. Create a wedge between Monique and me so that way I wouldn't eventually tell her the truth about our relationship. Guess he knew deep down inside I still wasn't able to come to grips with revealing I betrayed the trust of my own best

friend.

Limping down the semi-busy sidewalk, everything I learned about faith and God over the past two years seemed to slip down the drain. The more steps I took, the more I realized none of this mess was real. Honestly, there were times where I struggled with all of this newfound religiosity.

“Fuck it,” I grumbled as I came to a pause in my walk. I leaned down and opened up the top part of my suitcase, pulled out my bible and then threw it in a trash can sitting in front of a café. “I’m done with this shit,” I said. “I ain’t no real Christian. Fuck this shit.”

Chapter Eight

Two weeks later…

"Man, I can't believe this bitch gon' serve me papers! I swear ta God if I get my hands on her, I'mma kill her! Like, I just might go to jail over the bitch," I angrily spat, sitting at the bar.

My homeboy, Myron, and I were at Rayco's, this upscale bar and lounge in the South Loop, throwing back these endless shots of Henny.

We had been meaning to check out this place for a while, but since I had a busy ass schedule, we hadn't had a chance to check it out. Between school, work, raising Ariyanna and then dealing with all of the drama with Shelly, Tanisha, and Trish, the last thing I had on my mind was going out and hanging with the guys. But now, as this life shit became more and more intense, I just needed to get out of the fucking house and get pissy drunk. I could've just stayed back at the crib, ordered me some pizza and blew a bag of weed but weed wasn't doing it for me anymore. Besides, now that my cousin was gone, I didn't even know if I had in me to put a blunt to my face. Every time I tried to take a hit of some Kush, I just kept thinking about her. Damn, I was missing her so much.

It was a chilly Thursday night. I asked my mama to watch Ariyanna for the night so I could just chill and relax. Get my mind off Tanisha's unexpected death.

This lounge though…It was aiight…Barely filled, only a few other patrons were inside the joint. Shit, there were more workers here than actual customers.

"Man, that shit is crazy, broski. I mean, so what you gon' do next? I mean, at the end of the day, I don't even see how a judge could even grant her visitation rights, let alone split custody if the bitch just got out of jail," he said.

I shook my head. "Tell me about it. Tell me fucking about it. The shit ain't even adding up. I mean, where the fuck did she even get the bread to even get an attorney. I'm just so confused about all of this. But I know that fat ass bitch, Monique, put her ass up to this shit," I complained, damn near ready to fall out my seat.

"Bruh, I feel you. I always knew Trish was a lil sneaky ass hoe," Myron grumbled, throwing a shot back. "So what you gonna do next?" he asked.

"Man, I'm finne get an attorney. In fact, I need to hit up that same nigga I had the last time. And then we gonna march right into that courthouse and put an end to this shit. Once and for all."

"But what about the DNA test. You gon take it?"

I scrunched my face. “Hell nah! The fuck?!? Why? I know Ariyanna is my daughter. Truth be told, I just think Trish dropped that shit on me to fuck with my head. Everybody can see Ariyanna looks just like me,” I said.

“Man, bruh. I think you should take a test though, real talk. I mean, everyone knew Trish used to get around,” Myron said shaking his head, somewhat laughing. “And do you really wanna be taking care of another nigga’s kid?”

Huh? His comment kind of threw me off for a second. I was confused by what he meant by that. “What the fuck you mean she used to *get around*. When we were together, I didn’t know that shit. I thought the bitch was loyal as fuck.”

Myron raised a brow. “You *really* thought that? Like for *real*?”

“Hell yeah! The fuck is you talm’bout?”

Myron lowered and shook his head. He reached in and grabbed his other shot. We had them lined up, back to back. “Bruh, I know you fucking lying right now. You gon sit up here and tell me you didn’t think Trish was a lil hoe?”

“No…Not really. I mean, she was a freak. But I didn’t think she was out there like that. She was kind of fucked up in the head, but I didn’t think she was messing around with niggas like that.”

Myron started to laugh again but this time I was getting fucking agitated. What the fuck was he really trying to imply?

“Yo, bruh, what the fuck is so funny? Ain’t nothin’ funny about this, bro.”

“Man, calm down. Lighten the fuck up. But damn, bro, I didn’t think you were that green. I mean, everyone on the block knew that Trish was a lil nasty thot. No one thought you two would actually get serious,” he said.

“Man, fuck you. You foul as fuck and out of pocket right now, bro,” I replied shaking my head. This nigga’s commentary was beginning to sober me the fuck up. If I had it in me, I’d quickly reach down and grab this empty barstool next to me and bludgeon this nigga to death.

“Anyways, fool, you need to lay off the drinks. And I need to head back to the crib. My BM been blowing my shit up. Just relax, man. I’m sure ain’t no judge in their right mind gonna let Trish get visitation rights, let alone get custody. The bitch ain’t even stable. She JUST got out of jail,” he said as he leaned in and tried to give me dap. I wasn’t feeling him at the moment, so I just waved him off. “I’ll holla at you later, nigga,” I said.

“Damn, it’s like that?” he said, his twisted with a bit surprise.

“Man, whatever. Go on and check on ya BM. Make sure she faithful,” I replied, somewhat irritated.

Myron scanned me up and down then shook his head. “Yeah, aiight. Peace,” he said, sauntering off and out of the bar.

“Fuck nigga,” I groaned under my breath.

With one more shot sitting in front of me, I contemplated for a moment whether or not I needed that shit. Then again, I didn’t drive here. I took a Lyft to get here. “Fuck it,” I groaned as I grabbed it and tossed that muhfucka back.

“You want some more rounds?” this lil thick ass white bartender hoe asked me as she began wiping down the counter in front of me.

“Nah, I’m good,” I said. “I’m about to head out. Thanks for the drinks,” I said as I pulled out some cash and slapped some twenties on the counter.

“Thanks,” she the bartender replied as she picked up the cash. Although I wasn’t into white bitches like that, shorty was kind of cute. She had long, silky black hair that ran down her back. Not too tall or too short, she had the build of a cheerleader. She had to be no older than twenty-five, maybe twenty-six.

Curiosity seeped in. “What’s your name?” I had to ask.

“Melissa. You?” she asked, throwing this sexy ass smile back at me.

“Dre…Nice to meet you,” I said, slightly throwing her a flirtatious grin.

“I like your hair,” she commented. “Really goes well with your face.”

“Really? What makes you say that?”

“I’m a stylist…I love hi-top fades. Anyways…Have a nice night,” she said and spun on her heels.

“Wait, you just gon’ walk away like that?” I asked.

“Well, I have other customers waiting for me.”

“Oh, okay. Well, let me get your number.”

She smiled. “Sure…”

~

“FUCK THIS PUSSY! FUCK THIS WHITE PUSSY!” Melissa screamed as I kept drilling that lil white pink pussy with all eight inches. I had this Becky cumming on my shit so much, I thought I was about to drown in her juices.

“You like that shit, huh?!? You like that black dick, huh?” I growled, pulling her hair back as I continued to shove this dick all deep up in her lil tight ass white pussy.

Man, I was in heaven dicking down this white broad. This was the first time EVER in my twenty-seven years of existence that I had a taste of some white pussy and I was so disappointed in myself that I never tried this shit earlier on.

It's funny 'cuz a bunch of my guys always used to try to encourage me to get me a white bitch but I absolutely refused. Had no real reason why. But then I always thought white bitches were gonna smell like spinach and tuna. But Melissa, goddamn, her lil pretty white pussy tasted like a marshmallow pie.

"Hell yeah! GIVE ME THAT BLACK DICK!" she screamed as she threw her lil booty back on.

Man, her guts were so juicy and tight, I knew I was gonna bust seconds from now.

"AHHHH! I'm cumming! FUCK!"

"PULL OUT!" she yelled

"Fuck!" I tried to quickly pull out but before I could I could feel some of my seed slip through the tip of my dick. When I managed to get my dick out, I bust the remaining nut on her back.

"Goddamn!" I yelled, taking in deep breaths. A nigga was sweaty profusely like I was in a dry sauna at the muhfuckin' gym and shit.

After I got Melissa's number, shorty hit me up an hour after I got back home. She didn't even hesitate in letting me know she wanted to fuck, so I invited her over with the swiftness just to see if this white pussy was hittin'. And it sure was. That shit was fucking fire. I ain't never had some pussy like this before in my life.

"I need to run to the bathroom," she said as she quickly shot up from my bed and made her way into the bathroom.

"Aiight," I replied, rolling my sweaty, naked body over into the bed and then pulled the sheets over me. Some minutes later, Melissa emerged from the bathroom and danced her slender naked white ass back into the bed. "Damn, that was some good sex. I haven't been fucked like that in a while," she said.

"Yeah…Shit, I haven't had sex like that either," I commented. Honestly, this was the first time in a long time I had been with a chick. Maybe I was being a bit delirious about just how good her pussy was now that I think about it. Hrrrm.

"So, are you in a relationship? You seeing anybody?" she asked.

"Nah. You?"

"Nope. I'm single…," she replied. "Well, anyway, let me get going. Thanks for the fuck," she said.

"Damn, you gonna dip out just that quick?" I asked.

Melissa raised a brow. "Umm, yeah…"

"Oh okay," I replied. "Well, maybe we can go out sometimes. I know ple—"

"Look, DeAndre…Thanks but no thanks. I don't really date black guys," she interrupted me, throwing her hands up.

"What? Are you serious?"

"Yeah. Serious as a heart attack. But thanks for the screw though,"

she said as she quickly threw her outfit back on.

I was stunned she'd even say some slick shit like that but I didn't care. "Wow. Okay. Man, get the fuck out of my house, white bitch. Get your shit and get ta steppin'. Pussy was trash anyways," I said.

"Oh, whatever!" she said and quickly dashed out of my bedroom. "Fucking asshole," I heard her shout before I heard her open my front door and slam it.

"Man, what the fuck ever," I groaned as I got up and made my way into the shower. Welp. At least I got to bust a big ass nut.

After I took a shower, I took my ass straight to bed. I had some important shit to take care of in the AM. I had already put in some PTO tomorrow so I could go straight to this lawyer's office and get working on this damn hearing I had coming up with Trish. Bitch thought she was gonna succeed, well, I was about to put a stop to that.

Chapter Nine

"Cum for me! baybee! CUM! SQUIRT DE PUZZY JOOS! SQUIRT!" Olufemi screamed as I watched him jack his big, black Nigerian dick from my iPhone.

Although I should've had my ass up on this early Friday morning, I was laying back in my bed, salivating at the sight of Olu's big, pretty dick. I had my phone angled up, pointing directly down at my naked body. He and I were video-fucking each other through Facebook messenger.

My legs were spread wide open so Olu (as he wanted me to call him) could see this pretty pussy of mine. I was a bit embarrassed that my lil pussy was covered in a mound of hair, but Olu said he loved a hairy twat. And indeed I did have an afro growing on my shit.

Truth be told, I didn't' know what the fuck was going through my head these last two years. Yeah, I tried to become a Christian and turn my life around but I realized that shit just wasn't in me. I prayed. I fasted. I meditated. I did everything I was supposed to do yet my life was a fucking wreck. So to hell with all that bullshit. If a bitch only had a few more months left to live, I might as well go out with a bang. Besides, Chadwick was right. I was a liar. I couldn't even come to grips with my truth. I was a nasty hoe. And if I was a nasty hoe, I might as well live up to it. So here I was in, in my bedroom, finger-fucking myself as Olufemi watched.

If you don't remember, Olufemi was the Uber driver who picked me up a few weeks ago. Although he claimed he was a bonafide Christian, I knew deep down his ass just wanted to link up with me to get some pussy. At first, I resisted his invitations to come out to his church or to hang out with him. He seemed a bit odd to me, but then again, I guess it was because he was from a different culture and shit. But now, after talking to him for a few days, I was ready to give in. It just sucked because I wished he was back in the states. Otherwise, fuck the virtual fucking shit. I would've been at his crib right now, jumping up and down on that dick. Olu told me he was in the US on a student visa and he had to go back to Nigeria, otherwise, he would've gotten into trouble.

Yeah, I ain't gonna lie. Playing with my pussy was feeling so good. Although I was still dealing with my cancer, and I could feel myself getting weaker and weaker as days progressed, getting as many orgasms as I could was my main mission right now.

"I'm finne cum again, Olu! Fuck, my pussy is so wet! Do you see that?" I moaned as I stuck my fingers in and out of my wet ass coochie. Then I pulled them out and stuck them in my mouth to lick up all the pussy juice dripping from my fingertips. Damn, I ain't came like this in a minute!

"CUM! I'm CUMMING!" he screamed and next thing you know he blasted his thick white nut all over the place. GODDAMN! I ain't never seen a nigga bust so much nut out of his dick! Damn, I wish I could be there to suck up every single damn drop, too! Truth be told, when I was a lil nasty bitch back in the day, I used to love the taste of cum. Ughhh! Olu was just so damn sexy!

"FUCK!" he panted as he wiped his hands off with a towel and then blew me a kiss. "That was good. Very very *gud*," he said in his thick accent.

"I know right. Ughh! I just wish you were here, Olu," I replied back, producing a big sad puppy face.

"I'll be back, baybee…I'm gonna take care of you. You no die. Cancer will be gone a few more months. I promise. And then I will take care of you for the rest of my life. I promise, baybee," he said.

"I love the sound of that, Olu. Anyways, it's starting to get late and I gotta get going to my doctor's appointment. Thank you for a great time."

"I love you, Treesha! I love you, baby," he said, once again blowing me a kiss and then winked at me.

"I love you, too, baby," I replied and then hung up the phone.

Knock! Knock!

"What's going on in there?"

Suddenly, my eyes shot open with fear and I quickly turned my attention to my door. "Oh my God," I whispered to myself. That sounded like Pastor Shirley.

"Coming! Hold on for a minute," I said as I quickly got up and cleaned up my bedroom. Completely naked, I didn't have time to try to put on an outfit. "Hold on, Pastor Shirley. Let me put my robe on," I said as I limped over to my dresser where I sat my nightrobe. Once I put it on and tightened it, I sprayed some air freshener in the room to get rid of the smell of pussy. I walked over to the door, took a deep breath and then opened the door.

A nervous grin came across my face. "Hey, Pastor Shirley! It's early in the morning! What's going on?"

"Everything alright in here? Karen, the girl next door, called down

to the security guard's desk and said she heard a bunch of noise up in here. Like some screaming and whatnot. Said it sounded like a bunch of people were fighting in your room," she said, throwing me this curious gaze.

I exploded into fake laughter. "Oh, no, Pastor Shirley. That was probably just my cell phone. I had been watching these crazy Facebook videos after I got done with bible study," I lied.

"Speaking of which, how come you haven't been coming to any of my meetings or to services? I feel like these last two weeks you've been in MIA. Everything alright?"

"Yeah, I'm fine...," I lied once more.

She didn't say anything back. Her eyes just turned into curious slits. "Let's talk for a minute. Can I come inside?"

I really wanted to say no so I quickly thought of an excuse. Honestly, I did have to get ready soon for my doctor's appointment. Today, Dr. Pirtle was supposed to be running another battery of tests to see how far along the cancer was truly spreading and what next treatment options I could go through in order to slow the disease. She told me at my last doctor's appointment that if the disease reached a certain threshold, I needed to consider going into hospice.

"I would, Pastor Shirley, but I gotta get ready for my doctor's appointment."

"Oh, I know. I won't be long," she said.

"Okay then," I said and then welcomed her into the room.

With deep curiosity etched into her chubby face, she scanned my room, her hands attached to her waist. "What's that smell?" she asked.

"Probably just my laundry," I lied.

"Okay," she replied as she made her way over to my computer desk, pulled out a chair and sat down. "Sit down," she said. I sat on the edge of the bed and gawked at her with anxiety. "What's wrong, Pastor Shirley?"

"I'm concerned about you…I've been noticing some quick, sudden changes in your personality."

"What do you mean?" I asked. "I'm fine, Pastor Shirley. I truly am. I've just been so busy lately."

"Girl, you ain't fooling me. I'm old enough to damn near be your grandmother. I heard about the situation you got going on with your child's father and I had been meaning to speak with you about that," she said. "How's that going?"

Damn. I wondered how she heard about my personal business. Then again, I forgot. I did run my mouth to a few of these girls here and, as usual, a catty ass bitch probably went and ran her mouth. I should've seen that coming. Honestly, I should've told Pastor Shirley what I had going on but I didn't want her that deep up in my business.

“Well, I got my hearing coming up pretty soon. I just wanna be able to get visitation rights before my health further deteriorates,” I said. “I just don’t know how long I have left to live,” I said. “Honestly, Pastor Shirley, I’m losing faith. I think I lost faith,” I said.

“Oh, child, you can’t lose faith. Not now! Look at how you far you’ve gotten in your life! You’re gonna walk back on God when he’s been walking with you this entire time?” she asked.

I couldn’t say anything in response. Although I knew Pastor Shirley was partly right, now wasn’t the time for her to try to intervene and stop me from second-guessing everything. I’d pretty much made up my mind that this Christian shit was just a little bit too much for me. Truth be told, I was somewhat faking it, deluding myself into being this person that I knew deep down I truly wasn’t. But I just thought perhaps the more I faked it, the more I’d make it. But I realized I didn’t even have it in me to lie to my own mothafuckin’ self.

I lowered my head and began to cry. Hopefully, these fake ass tears would usher her ass out of my room ASAP. Besides, I only had a few more weeks to deal with her and then I’d be off on my own.

“I know, Pastor Shirley. I know. I’m trying.”

“Well, you just gotta keep praying, honey. Life ain’t easy. It will never be. God didn’t say any of this will be easy. This is all a part of the test to see how much faith you have to keep pushing on.”

“I know,”

“But do you?”

Awkard silence came into the room. To a degree, I felt like, damn, maybe she could sense I was somewhat being fake about my faith.

“I *think* I do,” I replied.

Not saying anything back, she rose from the seat and strolled over to me as I still sat on the bed. She looked down at me and then said, “Stand up. Give me a hug.”

As we embraced, she leaned into my ear and whispered, “I’ve been there, done that. Just promise me that if you only have so much time left, that you make the best of it. Don’t leave here and end up making the same mistakes. At the end of the day, I don’t care whether or not you really believe in God. I just want you to be better. To be whole as a woman. As a *black* woman. Don’t mess up this second chance at life. Don’t lose your redemption being impulsive. That’s the fastest way that will land you back in jail. And possibly for good.”

My core was shaken as I didn’t expect to hear those words fly out of her mouth. She released me, smiled and then turned around, making her way to the door. “Good luck at your doctor’s appointment,” she said and then exited my room.

~

Knock! Knock!

Two knocks at the exam room's door instantly shot me out of a daze I was in. For the past twenty minutes or so, I had been sitting inside Dr. Pirtle's office inside the exam room, hoping that maybe today I'd get some better news. The door opened and Dr. Pirtle waltzed in. It was now Friday afternoon.

"Hey, LaTrisha! How's it going?"

"I'm fine, Dr. Pirtle. How are you today?"

"I'm good! Very good!" She fumbled through a manila folder and then pulled out a single sheet of paper, which probably were some test results I presumed. As she carefully scanned the paper, she bobbed her head up and down. "Wow…"

"Wow what?" I quickly asked. Nausea filled my stomach.

"Well, it seems like the immunotherapy we gave you is working," she said. "This is promising. If we can slow down the cancer and put it into regression, I think we should also try something else I've been researching lately for my other patients."

"Oh my God! What's that?"

"Intravenous Vitamin C therapy…"

"Huh? Vitamin C? Like oranges?"

Dr. Pirtle began chuckling. "No, dear…Well, yeah, Vitamin C is found abundantly in citrus. But actually, with intravenous Vitamin C therapy, we give you heavy rounds of liquid Vitamin C or sodium ascorbate. There are some clinical studies out there that show that when Vitamin C is introduced in the bloodstream, it quickly converts to hydrogen peroxide then kills cancer cells. Kills bacteria and viruses, too."

"Wow. I'm kind of confused but I guess it sounds good, right?"

"Yeah. In fact, one of the good things is treatment is somewhat inexpensive. Then again, we'd have to see if Medicaid would cover it. We wouldn't be the ones to administer it though. I found an IV therapy center out in Skokie that does these Vitamin C megadose treatments," she said.

"So, wait, I'm still confused, Doctor. Are you saying I ain't really dying?"

She smiled. "I guess you can say that. If we continue with the immunotherapy and then add in some additional alternative treatments like the Vitamin C megadose treatment, I think we'd be able to kill off all of the cancer inside of your body."

"Oh my God! Thank you, Dr. Pirtle. Oh My God! I've been so scared about today! I didn't know what the hell I was gonna do!" I screamed, tears beginning to rush down my cheeks.

I shot up from the exam bed and gave Dr. Pirtle a tight hug. Although she wasn't exactly giving me one-hundred percent good

news, any sign of good news at this point was one-hundred percent to me. The feeling of knowing that my chances of living were now higher sent me into a frenzy and I couldn't hold back any more tears. I cried like a baby and she consoled me, telling me everything was gonna be alright. "I told you, sis! Just gotta be patient sometimes," she said.

"Thank you so much, Doctor. I don't know what I would've done without you," I replied, sniffling like a nine-year-old badass kid that just got a whooping.

"Well, let's go ahead and do some more routine tests and then I'm gonna have you talk to Harriette out front about whether or not Medicaid will approve the Vitamin C therapy, okay?"

"Okay," I replied, wiping my face free of tears.

Chapter Ten

One thing a mothafucka was gonna learn about DeAndre Williams was not to fuck with three things most valuable to me – my money, my mama and my kid. So, you already know from the moment Trish hit me with them court papers, I was about to go full offense on her and shut her shit down ASAP.

Doing as promised, I ran my ass right down to the same attorney I used the last time I had to deal with Trish's ass. Mr. Harrington's office told me I could come in first thing in the morning so we could get this situation squared away, once and for all.

Flying down Lake Park Avenue in the Charger, I quickly made my way to 53rd street and found a parking spot in front of Mr. Harrington's building. Once I got out, I flew inside the building and made my way up to his floor. I was immediately stunned when I saw that his office looked remarkably different from the last time. Looked like this nigga went through some serious upgrades. Damn, he must've won a big ass lawsuit or something. Now walking with cautiousness, I proceeded inside the doors and sauntered up to the receptionist's desk. This time, some sexy ass petite Asian bitch with some plump ass lips was working the front desk. Shit, a nigga should try to get her number. Then again, I got this vibe that she was probably into white boys. I cleared my throat and said, "Hey there. Good mornin', beautiful. I'm here to see Mr. Harrington."

"Are you DeAndre?" she asked, throwing me a somewhat unimpressed look.

"Yeah, I am…"

"Have a seat. He'll be with you shortly," she said. Damn, lil bitch had an attitude I see.

About ten minutes later, some light-skinned, mulatto-lookin' ass nigga bumbled around the corner and then proceeded into the waiting area. Dressed like he was straight off a GQ magazine, this fake ass Omari Hardwick-lookin' ass nigga reached out to shake my hand. "DeAndre?" he asked with this shady ass smile on his face. "Yeah," I said, not smiling back. "Who are you?"

"Oh…Sorry…Ditya probably didn't tell you but I'm Mr. Harrington

as well. Well, Sherman Harrington, Jr. My father retired last year. I took over the firm. Sorry for the miscommunication," he explained.

"Oh. Damn. Yeah, I didn't know," I replied as I stood up and cautiously shook his hand. "Follow me," he grinned and then led me all the way to the back to his office. The last time I was here, there weren't any other lawyers working here but seemed like things had changed quite a bit. The rest of the offices were filled with other lawyers and as we passed each individual office in the hallway, I could hear the murmuring of people chatting. Presumably, attorneys talking to their clients. Or could some clients explaining their fucked up legal situation.

"Damn, seems like business is booming," I said as Harrington, Jr., led me to his office door and then opened in. "Hell yeah!" he replied as he invited me inside the totally renovated office. This shit was decked the fuck out. The last time I was here, the office was barely filled with some basic ass Office Depot furniture. But now, this young nigga had what seemed like some expensive ass Italian shit all up in this mothafucka. A big red oak desk was centered in the middle of the office. A hi-def 5k television blasting CNN was glued to a wall adjacent to a massive bookshelf that was filled with at least a thousand books.

"Have a seat," he said as he pulled out a seat in front of his desk and then made his way around and sat down himself.

I sat down, and I was already starting to get bad vibes from this nigga. "So what brings you here?" he asked.

"Well, the last time I came here, your dad helped me out with a custody situation with my daughter. He got business squared away ASAP. I can go ahead and pay the retainer right now to go ahead and handle this mess," I said.

"Okay. Well, what's the situation now? Don't you have fully custody?"

"Yes. I do. But my child's mother, she's out of jail now and she hit me up with papers."

"You have those?"

"Yeah, I do," I replied as I quickly pulled out the court summons from my jacket and slid them across buddy's desk. He grabbed them and carefully scanned them. "Hrrrm. So she filed an emergency motion with the court to look into re-establishing her visitation rights and then she's also challenging for split custody."

"Exactly. How in the hell can she even do that? She was just in jail for selling dope."

"But she's the mother, right?"

"Yeah. Is she rehabilitated? Working?"

"Hell if I know. She just showed up to my mama's crib. She talkin'

about she became a born-again Christian and she works part-time for the same halfway house where she lives. She ain't even—"

"Let me stop you right there," he interrupted. "First, get rid of the anger and the attitude problem. If you're serious about winning this case and showing a judge that this lady is unfit to be your child's mother, then you need to not act like you have a chip on your shoulders. Ninety-percent of the family court judges in Cook County are women and sixty-percent of them are Black women, brotha. Last thing you wanna do is walk inside any of these judges' courtrooms parading your bitter masculinity," he said.

My face twisted with confusion, I had the sudden urge to deck this asshole in his face. But I was so vulnerable right now. I had no other choice but to listen to what this pretentious asshole had to say. "Okay," I replied.

Attorney Harrington then continued to scan the summons and then he tossed it to the side. "So here's the thing. Your daughter's mother is going to gain the sympathy of a judge. Your child's mother went two years without being able to see her child. A judge is going to give in and try to establish some sort of visitation protocol. Supervised or unsupervised, it's gonna happen, unfortunately. Now as far as split-custody, well, I doubt a judge will give in to that. The hearing is still some weeks away. If your child's mother can prove she is stable, has her own place, a good job and has good references, there *is* a slim chance her petition could get approved."

Shaking my head, I lowered it into my palms. I found myself in sudden disbelief. This nigga was telling me everything I didn't want to hear. But then, I also had to drop this other dime on him. "She's also claiming the child may not mine, too," I confessed.

"Nigga, *WHAT*?!?" he roared.

I gawked at up this fool.

He gasped and a look of embarrassment came across his face. "My bad, brotha. I…I just didn't expect to hear that…," he apologized.

"It's cool."

"Brotha…You mean to tell me you *never* took a paternity test when she first got pregnant? Were you all married or engaged or something?"

"No."

"So what in the hell made you think the child was yours? Did you have any suspicions she was sleeping around?"

All of a sudden, I grew annoyed as fuck with this dude's line of questioning. "Man, look, dude. I know I fucked up. I was immature as hell back then when I got her pregnant. There's a lot I am learning now. But I don't need the judgment, bro. Especially if I am gonna be paying you mad cash to get me out this jam," I angrily spat.

“Hey, man. I’m not judging you. I’m just letting you know the smart thing to do in all these situations is to always get a paternity test. Even *if* you think the kid looks like you, you never know. Anyways, we can start working on this case ASAP. You have your deposit already?”

“Yeah,” I replied and pulled out some stacks of twenties that equaled out to a thousand dollars. That was what it cost me the last time and I assumed this time handling this case would cost the same.

“Here you go,” I said as I slide the crispy bills onto his desk.

“What’s that?”

“$1,000. That was what I got charged the last time,” I said.

Next thing you know this nigga exploded into a huge chuckle. “$1,000?!? That was what my father charged you?”

“Yeah…”

“DeAndre. Brotha…I went to Harvard. Not Howard. My rate is $1,000…per hour. That includes paralegal fees, case research, court filings, and other expenses. A case like this will take at least twenty billable hours. You’re gonna have to come up with at least a $20,000 retainer if you want me to continue…”

“$20,000?!?!? Nigga, is you crazy? Man, you got me fucked up! $20,000 the fuck for what?!?”

Attorney Harrington’s smile became flat and unmotivated. He simply slid the crispy bills back into my direction. “Sorry, but that’s my rate. Honestly, dad was probably just doing you a favor since he was already semi-retired when you worked with him. You can always try Legal Aid. DePaul has a good—”

“Man, fuck you,” I said as I grabbed my cash off his table, stood up and walked out of that mothafucker’s office.

Nigga had me all the way fucked up if he thought I was gonna drop twenty stacks to get me out this bind. Storming out the office, I didn't even wanna give the lil Asian bitch a glance (although I should've tried my hardest to get them digits). Soon as I got back to my Charger, I hopped in and angrily sped off down the street. “Fucking asshole,” I grumbled shaking my head as I turned up the in my car. Truth be told, a nigga needed a fucking drink now. A stiff one at that. I should’ve stopped by Kimbark Liquors and picked up a bottle of some Henny but it was still too early in the day to get drunk. But then the thought hit me.

Shelly.

I forgot all about her. She did tell me she was a family attorney. And we were supposed to link up some weeks ago to start making some parental arrangements, but with all the drama that happened, our plans fell through. I guess now was an opportune time in order to arrange that playdate with Junior and Ariyanna. And then I could pick

her brains about this situation.

Once I came to a red light, I quickly found her contact in my phone and dialed her. Some rings later, she answered, “So, you are finally calling me back, I see…”

“Hey, sorry about everything,” I apologized. “I’ve just had a lot going on. Are you busy? Can we talk?”

“Dre…I’m in the middle of work but I’m glad you called. Give me a few minutes and I’ll hit you back, okay?”

“Okay. Sorry for calling you during work.”

“It’s cool,” she said and then hung up.

As annoyance continued to bubble within me, I finally got back home and parked. I had been meaning to hit up Myron and apologize for our conversation last night. He, too, was probably in the middle of working now but I went ahead and gave him a ring. Seconds later, he answered, “Wassup, bro? You still on bullshit?” he asked.

“Nah, nigga, look, my bad for acting that way. This shit is just too much for me man.”

“Yeah, I feel you, broski, but let me hit you back later. I’m trying to de-escalate this call with one of my reps,” he said.

“Aiight, man. Hit my line later.”

Chapter Eleven

"I never understood what you even saw in that hoe ass nigga, to be honest with you," Myron laughingly said to me as he hung up his cell phone and shook his head.

"That was him who just called?" I curiously asked. I felt so bad being in the car with Dre's best friend, Myron, knowing that this nigga was playing both sides.

"Yeah…That was that bitch ass nigga," Myron giggled. "Anyways, so you finally hit his ass with them papers. I know that nigga didn't see that shit coming. Wack ass fuck nigga."

"Yeah, I did. And thank you for calling me up and telling me what happened to Tanisha. She and I were cool but since Dre and I were getting into it, we kind of lost contact. It was so fucked up what happened," I said.

"Yeah, yeah, yeah. Well, she was on some other shit. Her ass was kind of crazy. It was just a matter of time before some crazy shit happened to her anyways. I didn't expect her to go out like that," Myron said shaking his head. He then stuffed a mild-sauce covered fried drumette into his mouth and chewed away.

He and I were sitting in his car in a parking lot of an Uncle Remus' Fried Chicken shack in Broadview, a suburb west of the city. The crazy thing was ever since I had got locked up, Myron was the only person who had steadily been in contact with me. From the moment I landed in jail, this nigga was sending me all types of letters, cards and even putting money on my books. I was thankful that he was looking out for me but I tried to minimize my contact with him because I didn't want to give him any impressions that I wanted something out of him.

Now, there you go again. I know you judging me, but before you jump to conclusions, I'll just go ahead and tell you…Yes, Myron and I was fucking around when I was with Dre. And truth be told, I kind of don't regret it because Myron was the one who told me that Dre was messing with all types of bitches when we were together. Although I never caught Dre in the act, the way he moved just always made me feel like the nigga was constantly running in the streets, messing with

other females.

Anyways…

Myron was kind of like my first payback dick. He was the first dude I had fucked when I began to get suspicions that Dre was fucking around on me. But that was the past, now I was simply trying to maintain some cordial friendship with Myron. He was truly a good guy and he meant well. Although he cheated on his baby mama with me, I never liked that bitch anyways and she was so disrespectful to Myron. To this day, I never understood why he was still with her. He worked two jobs, paid all the bills and took care of his two twin boys while her fat ass stayed at home and ate chips and watched Judge Judy. Fat ass hoe. I couldn't stand a bitch like that. Ughh! Let me stop. I did tell myself after I got back my results that I was going to try my hardest to rekindle my faith in Christ and not revert back to my old ways. Pastor Shirley was right. I needed to hold out hope and stop just easily giving in into temptation.

"It's just so unfortunate I had to go down this route with him but it is what it is. I deserve to see my baby girl," I said.

"Yeah, well, let me ask you a question. The nigga is claiming that you told him that Ariyanna may not be his. That's true?" Myron asked, smacking his teeth.

I froze for a moment and didn't know if Myron was asking me some sort of bait question. But then again, this dude was in love with me. I was pretty sure he was looking out for my own good. "Yeah…I just never told him. He used to do me so wrong back then," I said. "But I figured he was the only guy who had his shit together, so I said fuck it. I'll let Ariyanna be his. I guess he's a good father tough," I confessed.

"Damn, that's kind of fucked, don't you think? I mean, Dre is an asshole and he got anger issues, but you don't think it's wrong to let the nigga continue to think the baby might be his."

"I mean, yeah, I see what you saying and all, but that's water under the bridge, Myron. I already told him I wanna do a paternity test when we go to court so that way he can move on. I can get my baby back and then he can focus on another child. Besides, I'm pretty sure he messing with a new woman anyways," I said.

"Yeah…" He took another bite out of his chicken then wiped his sexy tan face with a napkin. Myron kind of reminded me of a lighter version of 50 Cent, except with dreads. "But still. But it is what it is though. Fuck him," he mumbled then took another bite out of his chicken wing.

"Well, I got some other good news though!" I excitedly said, wanting to kind of change the subject.

"What's that?"

"Well, you know, I thought I was dying. My doctor told me today that my cancer is starting to retreat. We're gonna be starting a new treatment plan on Monday!"

"Yayyy!" Myron said as he reached over and wanted to give me hi-five. "I'm so glad to hear that, Trish. You deserve good news. I know all of this mess has been a lot for you," he said.

"Thank you," I replied as I picked through my fried catfish. I sure did miss eating Harold's. Now that I was going on a different treatment plan, I figured I could cheat a little and eat something different for a change.

"Anyways, I appreciate everything you did for me when I was locked up, Myron. You are a good man. Why are you still with Quisha?"

Myron suddenly lowered and shook his head. "Shit, I ask myself that every damn day, truth be told. Only reason why I keep her raggedy ass around is because she's a good mother to my kids."

"Is she really though? I mean, she don't work. She doesn't keep herself up. I mean, I'm not one to judge given my situation, but damn, you got a lot going for yourself. You're back in school. You about to move into a new house. Don't you wanna do better? It ain't like ya'll married or anything."

"I know…But it's whatever," he said, stuffing another wing in his face. Then he took a swig from his Pepsi.

Myron and I continued to talk and eat. A part of me wished he wasn't with that fat ass hoe, otherwise, I would've tried to make my move on him. He was such an endearing sweetheart and I knew he'd make a great husband one day. Not just with that Quisha bitch. After we got done eating, Myron drove me back to Hope.

"Aiight, Trish. Well, holla at me anytime. You know we family and all," Myron said as I got out of his Pontiac and headed back inside Hope.

I checked in with the security guard and then made my way to the mailbox to check to see if I got any mail.

"Hey, girl…"

I looked up. It was Donna.

"Wassup?" I said, quickly throwing my attention back to my mailbox.

"How's everything? You still mad at me?"

"No, not really. Anyways, I gotta get going. I'll holla at you later," I said once I grabbed my mail and then shoved past her. I ain't have time for any of her foolishness. Soon as I got back up into my room, the first thing I was gonna do was get straight on my knees and thank God for bringing me out of this mess. Although I found myself slipping back into my old ways, I had promised God in Dr. Pirtle's office that I

was going to try to get back on track and stay committed to his word.

~

"And in Jesus' name, I pray…Amen," I mumbled once I finished praying. I opened my eyes and grabbed my phone sitting off to my side on my bed. I had been on my knees for the last hour or so, praying my heart out, thank God for those miraculous test results he gave me. Pastor Shirley was right and now the first thing I was gonna do was go down and attend one of her bible study meetings tonight. Fridays were usually movie night for Hope, but Pastor Shirley often held a bible study in case people didn't want to watch movies.

Now that the Holy Ghost was moving through me and healing my body, I could feel my sense of energy return. My hip wasn't bothering me as much. Hopefully, within weeks I wouldn't need to walk with the assistance of a cane anymore. I got up off my knees and stretched. "Whoo! Chile! I feel good!" I laughed. "God is great!"

It was now nearly seven PM and Pastor Shirley's Bible study was going to start in about ten minutes. I quickly searched my room to see if I had an additional bible to bring with me. I threw my other one away that day Chadwick kicked me out. Then suddenly I started to hear my phone vibrate on my bed.

"Who is that?" I mumbled to myself as I dashed over to my bed and grabbed the phone. I looked and down and didn't recognize the phone number. It was a 773 area code though, so that had to be someone in the city. "Hello?" I answered.

"Hey, LaTrisha Johnson?" the female voice said on the other end.

"Umm, yes, this is she," I replied.

"Hey! This is Rebecca from Property Solutions International! We were calling to let you know that we approved your application for an apartment and we could get you moved in as soon as possible!"

"Really!?!? Oh my God!" I shouted, clasping my mouth. I didn't see any of this coming but one of the caseworkers for Hope had told me since I was weeks away from leaving the halfway house, she was gonna work to help me find an apartment.

"Yes! Are you still interested?"

"Of course!"

"Okay, well that is good to hear! In order to secure the apartment, we are going to need you to put down a $1,000 deposit. We can go ahead and take the deposit right now through debit card, credit card or check over the phone. How would you like to pay?"

"Wait! What do you mean I have to pay a $1,000 deposit now? The leasing agent told me they would waive the deposit if I filled out an application and got approved immediately."

“Ohhhhhh…Yeah, well, that promotion actually expired last week. You would’ve needed to be approved on that same day. Your background check took a while to complete,” the lady said.

“Damn! That ain’t right. I don’t even think I have $1,000 just to chuck up. Besides, I am just getting back onto my feet. I clearly explained that to the leasing manager! Ya’ll lied to me!”

“I’m sorry, ma’am, but in order for us to go ahead and secure the unit for you, you’re gonna have to put down at least $1,000. That’s our rental policy,” the lady said.

“Ughh! Okay. Well, when is the latest I could pay the $1,000?”

“Well, technically we would need it now but we can make an extension until tomorrow evening. After that, the unit that you wanted will go back up on the market. Your application will still be good for at least thirty days but we can’t put a lock on the unit. And that was the last one in our building,” the lady said.

“Damn, okay. Well, let me see what I can come up with. I’ll have to give you all a call tomorrow,” I explained.

“Okay, well give us a call back promptly,” Rebecca said.

“Thank you. Have a nice night.”

“You do the same.” I then hung up.

“FUCK!” I yelled, stomping my foot. But then I quickly clasped my mouth. “Sorry, Lord,” I apologized. I need to get my mouth in order. But I couldn’t believe that damn leasing agent would be kind of deceptive and bait me into getting approved for an apartment knowing I didn’t have the money right now for that much of a deposit.

Given my background, this place one of a few property management companies in the city that were willing to work with people with criminal backgrounds. Luckily, since my credit wasn’t all too messed up and I had a job guarantee from Hope (Pastor Shirley was moving me to full-time as an office assistant in a few weeks), I was able to get approved for a two-bedroom apartment down in Woodlawn for $700 a month. I had been desperately searching for a place to stay now for some weeks and Monique’s paralegal friend told me the quicker I could get a place, the better it would look in front of a judge. With my hearing now just two weeks away, I needed this place ASAP.

Pastor Shirley’s class was starting in a few but now I didn’t have time for none of that. I had to get to work. With only about $600 in my name right now, I needed to see if anyone I knew could help me get my hands on $1,000. Without hesitation, I pulled out my phone and dialed Neicy to see if she could help. Once I pulled up her contact, I quickly dialed her and she answered within a few seconds. “Hey, little sis! I was just meaning to call you! How’d your doctor’s appointment go?”

“Hey, sis! It was good actually! I got some good news. I found out the cancer might be going into regression with this new therapy Dr. Pirtle got me on!”

“Oh my God! Why didn’t you call me and tell me earlier?!?!” she asked.

“Yeah, I know! I’ve just been so overly excited. I’m sorry I forgot to call you. And I’ve been running a million errands just trying to get things straight before I head out of here,” I said.

“Yeah, I hear you on that! Oh my God! I’m gonna cry right now though! I’ve been so worried,” she said.

“Yeah, I know. Me, too.”

I paused for a moment. I didn’t want to waste any time and I needed to let her know what was up. “Hey, big sis. Look, I’m calling because I need a big favor…”

“What’s that?” she asked.

“Well, I just got a call from this property management company. I got approved for the two-bedroom apartment I was telling you about but they want me to come up with $1,000 if I want to move in ASAP. And I ain’t just got it. You think you could lend me $1,000?”

“I thought they said they weren’t going to charge you a deposit and whatnot?”

“That’s what I thought, too!” I said.

“Damn…Well, LaTrisha, I wish I could but I ain’t got it. I just got my hours reduced because of this damn city furlough and I’m holding onto every coin I can,” she explained. “Damn. Damn! DAMN! Shit! This just ain’t right!”

“I know right. I just don’t know what I’m going to do at this point.”

“Well, let me see if I can pull money from my 401k. I mean, you say you can pay me back, right?”

“Yeah, I can…Well, if I do pull money out of my 401k, I won’t be able to get to it until Monday. When do you need the money?”

“Damn…Like tomorrow. She said she could only hold the unit until tomorrow.”

“Fuck…Shit…I’m sorry, I didn’t mean the cuss,” Neicy apologized. “Well, let me call around and see what I could do. But quick question, I mean, why do you need to get the apartment now? Why not just stay with me?”

“Neicy, I need the apartment to show the judge that I’m stable and back on my feet. And besides, I love you, but it’s probably just best I get my own place…”

“Yeah, you’re right,” she said. “Well, let me see what I can do. What about Monique? Did you call her?”

“I should call her right now probably.”

“Okay, well you do that and then I’ll see what I can do. Maybe I

can talk to some of our kinfolk and see if they could help out," she said.

"Okay, sis. I'll hit you up a bit later. We got some other things to talk about," I said, damn near wanting to cry as panic began to set in.

Once I hung up with Neicy, I quickly called Monique but her phone went straight to voicemail. That was odd. I called her again. I didn't get an answer. "Damn it," I said to myself, fidgeting with my fingers.

Some fifteen minutes had passed and now I was pacing up and down in my room, wondering what I could do next. Then there was Myron…But, ughh! I didn't want to call him up and ask for money knowing that I was taking money out of his pockets that would go to his kids. I would feel so wrong doing that. Quickly running out of options, I didn't know what else to do at this point.

Then the lights went off in my head. Olu. Maybe he could help me out. I quickly pulled up my Facebook messenger app and searched to see if I could find him online. However, when I went to his profile, I saw that he couldn't receive messages anymore. What the hell?!? Then I went to my main Facebook app and saw that he and I weren't friends anymore. Either he deleted and blocked me or his profile got deactivated. That probably explained why we hadn't talked for a few days. "Damn it!" I groaned aloud but this time I didn't care if I cursed.

I sat down on my bed and rocked back and forth, quickly trying to come up with a solution to get this stack. I looked around my room to see if I had anything to sell.

Nothing.

But then there was my laptop. Nah. I would only get maybe like $100 for it. And I knew that for sure because I sold an old laptop before at a pawn shop in Wicker Park and got less.

Tears began to slide down my face and then I saw Neicy calling me back on my phone. I didn't want to answer because I just knew she probably didn't have a solution either but then I went ahead and answered anyway.

"Wassup? Any good news?" I asked.

"Well, I reached out to Antonio and he said he got like $200 on him. But that's it. Everyone who I could think of who would have it said they didn't have it…"

"Damn! Man, just when I was trying to do the right thing…"

"Uh-ugh! No! Don't think that way, Trish. Be positive. Besides, we still got time before your hearing anyway."

"I know, girl, but nothing's guaranteed."

"Yeah. Well, let me see who else I could call. Just keep praying, okay?"

"Okay," I replied and then she hung up.

Chapter Twelve

This Friday was already turning out to be one big headache for me. After I talked to Shelly earlier, she called me back some hours later and invited me to come over tonight. She told me that she had her aunty watching Junior over the weekend, which actually kind of sucked because I did want him and Ariyanna to meet each other for the first time. I also did want to start to spend more time with him.

As the sun began to fade and chilly gusts swam through the city, eight-thirty pm struck the clock inside of my Charger as I made my way up to West Loop to meet up with Shelly. I was a bit apprehensive about going over to her place. Why? Well, I had a feeling she was going to try to be on some slick hoe shit and try to get the dick. Truth be told, a nigga would hit the pussy if she was giving it out but that would be all the fuck I wanted out of her. Nothing more, nothing less. We could co-parent and fuck once in a while, but I didn't want any type of real relationship with her.

I hopped off the expressway and got onto Halsted. Shorty lived off Green Street in this luxury condo building. For a split second, I kind of wondered the possibility of us being together. Shit, from the looks of it, Shelly had to be making some mad bread as an attorney. With my ambitions of getting into law school in the near future, I should try to pick her brain so she could give me some career advice and whatnot. The more I thought about it, hell, if we did become a couple in the near future (shit, you never know what the future holds), we could some on power couple type shit.

I pulled up to her building and following her instructions, I dialed to get into her garage. Once I got in and parked, I quickly hopped out of my ride and made my way to her floor. Once I got to her door, I rung her doorbell.

"Coming," I heard her say and then some seconds later her door opened.

Instantly my eyes fell onto her petite and well-proportion body. Shorty was definitely giving me Nia Long vibes. Man, she was sexy as fuck and if I wasn't such an impulsive asshole, I could've really made something work with her from the very beginning. Anyways, I smiled

and said, “Sorry I’m running behind. I had to stop by mother’s place to check up on Ariyanna,” I said.

“Oh, okay! No worries. Come right on in,” she said, inviting me into her posh condo.

Walking in, my eyes curiously scanned her vast living room, taking in the expensive ass leather couch set she had. A big ass hi-def television was plastered to the wall. A rerun of the Cosby Show was blaring in the background. I cut my eyes over to the big ass, open kitchen. Damn, Shelly must’ve hired an interior designer to come in and deck this shit out because the motif and layout looked like some fancy shit straight off HGTV. She definitely wasn’t a white fridge-type of bitch. Shorty had nothing but stainless steel appliances all up in this mothafucka.

“Damn, so tell me the secret,” I commented with a big ass grin slapped on my still curious face.

“Secret to what?” she asked as we both stood still between the foyer and the living room.

“Like, your secret to getting all of this…Like, you never struck me as the lawyer type.”

“Why you say that?”

“I don’t know…’Cuz when we linked up that time, you were kind of…” I didn’t want to say it.

“Kind of what?” she looked perplexed. Last thing I wanted to was to piss her off, so I quickly tried to formulate the right words.

“Well, you know, ratchet…”

“Hah! Well, Dre, I was drunk and high as hell that night. Every woman who has had a lot to drink and smoke would have their inner hoe come out. Plus, sometimes you just gotta live,” she said. Her face then twisted with judgment as she looked me up and down and said, “And you’re one to talk. You’re the walking definition of a man hoe. Anyways, sit down and make yourself comfortable.”

My head flew back and my brow raised. “What? Man hoe?” I replied as I made my way into the living room and sat down while she trekked into her kitchen.

“Yeah…Man hoe. Do you want something to drink? I have lemonade, cider, water, Gatorade and milk.”

“You got any henny? I need a stiff drink,” I said.

“Hrrrm…Well, I’m not really much of a drinker anymore but you’re more than welcome to go run to the liquor store. There’s one a block up.”

“I’m fine,” I replied. “I guess I’ll have some lemonade.”

“Cool. With ice?”

“Sure…”

Some moments later, Shelly emerged into the living room with two

tall glasses of ice-chilled pink lemonade in her hand. She handed me one. “Please use the coaster on the table. Don’t mess up my nice ass shit,” she laughingly said.

“Bet.” I took a quick sip and then sat the glass on the coaster. She sat next to me and then said, “So, let’s talk about co-parenting I guess…”

“Shelly, before we get into all of that, I actually need your advice.”

Her head flew back with a raised brow. “What? You want legal advice?”

“Yeah,” I replied.

“How much you paying? I don’t work for free…”

“Ah, come on,” I replied smacking my teeth. “One lawyer is already trying to charge me twenty-stacks. You on that shit, too?”

“Umm….Dre…Welcome to the legal industry, partner. You said you wanted to be an attorney, right? You know how many people are gonna try to pull what you are doing right now? Trying to get free legal advice on the low? I studied and worked too hard to give my advice out for free. So my rate is gonna be a play date with me, Ariyanna and Junior every Sunday for the next ten weeks.”

I lowered and shook my head. “Fine,” I replied.

She stuck her hand out and said, “Shake on it.”

Cautiously extending my hand out, I shook hers and then said, “Please let this advice be worth it.”

“So what’s your question?”

“Well, I got this crazy situation going on with Ariyanna’s mother. She just got out of jail and she wants to try to re-establish her visitation rights. She also wants split custody now. She’s also claiming that Ariyanna may possibly be another dude’s child. I don’t believe her though.”

“What?!?! Dre! You mean to tell me that you and this woman have a child together and you never did a DNA test? Are you crazy?”

“Please…Just spare me the judgment for a moment. I know I sound stupid as fuck not doing a paternity test but at the time I was just way too much into my emotions,” I said.

“Anyways…So, she just got out of jail? How long ago?”

“I think like six or seven months ago. I’m not too sure. I hadn’t been keeping tabs on her.”

“Where does she live now? What does she do? Does she have a job?”

“I think she stays at a halfway house. Her and her sister kind of don’t get along. But she’s claiming she also has cancer and she’s dying. She’s a born-again Christian and now and all of this extra shit. Bitch just sounds—”

“Excuse me?” Shelly interrupted, looking instantly annoyed.

"What?"

"I'm not gonna let you sit up here and call another woman, especially another black woman a bitch. I don't care what situation you have going on with your child's mother but if you and I are gonna have some sort of working co-parenting relationship, I'm not going to allow you to berate another black woman."

"Sorry," I mumbled.

"Well, continue," Shelly said, taking a sip of her lemonade.

"Well, anyways, she's talking crazy."

"First, before you do anything, you shouldn't even waste your time with the courts if you don't know whether or not you're Ariyanna's father. I mean, even if you are technically not her father, you should still know. Second of all, it's also good to know in case someone tries to file a paternity suit against you. You never know who's lurking in the shadows," Shelly explained and then took another sip of her drink. "Now that I think about it, this story sounds crazier by the minute. I think I need some Hennessey, shit…Let's go to the liquor store," she said.

"Okay," I replied.

Some moments later we both left her condo and headed down to the liquor store a block away.

~

"So, like I said, what I can do is talk to my girl, Dominique, to see if she could help you out. I am sure she's within budget for an attorney you're looking for. I can't handle your case because it would be a conflict of interest," Shelly explained.

We had got back an hour ago and while we took shots of Hennessey, Shelly gave me nonstop advice about how to handle the situation with LaTrisha. Although I was a bit irritated that she used a playdate arrangement as a fee in exchange for advice, I was glad we got that out of the way.

"I appreciate everything, Shelly. I really do. I just feel so bad that we never really got to know each other. You seem like a down-to-earth chick. Like, I really feel kind of bad now," I said.

"Bad about what?"

"That we didn't take things further."

"Yeah, well, that was the past. We just need to focus on co-parenting our child together. I just want our son to have an active father in his life."

"Yeah," I replied and then paused for a moment. I gave her a seductive stare and then said, "Well, maybe we could possibly rekindle some things. No rush but I'd like to get to know you. Seems

like we have a lot in common, ya know?"

Not saying anything back to me, Shelly just stared at me with this weird smile fixed on her face. "Ummm…No…I think the fuck not," she said. "You're cool and all, Dre. And I guess during that time we hooked up, the sex was…great. But I don't think you're really my type?"

"Why not?" I had to ask. Damn, shorty was rejecting me and I didn't even know if I was hearing her right. I had never been rejected by a female before when I gave an initial advance.

"Well, for starters, you're a bit too hood. I mean, don't get me wrong. I've fucked with hood guys before. But you all are dangerous and reckless," Shelly said. "I prefer someone who's already established. I mean, I know you're getting your shit together but I'm not the type of woman who's gonna sit back and wait for a guy to grow up. And you're a bit immature. And you also are a bit misogynistic," she said.

"Damn, really? I'm all that?"

"Yeah. You are…I mean, yeah, I'm not gonna lie. I thought about us having a future when it seemed like we were getting our situation with Junior squared away but that thought quickly fled my mind. If there was a slim chance in hell I'd want to be in a relationship with you, let alone go out on a date with you, there are a lot of things you'd need to change about your personality."

"Such as?"

"Well, for starters, your language. I mean, yeah, I curse a lot, too. But the way you reference women. Females. Bitches. Hoes. You have scorn for women. What does your mother think about your relationship with women? I'm quite sure deep down she hasn't been too thrilled with the way you treat women," she said.

Right then and there, once she mentioned my mother, I grew very fucking pissed. Granted, I could take some light criticism, but the way Shelly was unloading onto me had me very fucking irritated.

I shook and lowered my head and then began to chuckle.

"What's funny?" she asked.

"You. You're funny." I continued, "It's almost as if this shit is a joke. Like, on one hand, you wanna sit up here and offer me all types of advice and what not to get me out of my situation but then you wanna sit up here and belittle me as if I'm some child. You know you got some fucking nerve. Immature? Man, you're the one who's immature. You waited a whole ass two years to drop this kid on me. If you really about your business, you would've confronted me right then and there when you found out you were pregnant. Anyways, Shelly, it was cool you invited me over and everything but I'mma head out now. You enjoy the rest of your night, sweetheart."

Soon as I said what the fuck I had to say, I stood up and began trekking through the living room.

"Don't forget about Sunday, Dre," Shelly said.

"Oh, I won't. I'm still responsible…baby mama," I said back, my tone filled with annoyance.

"I bet you won't…baby daddy," she replied. "Loser…"

"Yeah, yeah, yeah. Whatever," I said, making my way to the door and then walked the fuck out. Bitch.

~

A good thirty minutes later, I hopped off Lake Shore Drive and made my way back to my townhouse. Shelly had me pissed as fuck and I could already see her and I weren't going to be getting along. Fuck her advice and her friend. I didn't need that bitch's help any damn way. Truth be told, I should've never told her shit and should've just done my research and found a different lawyer.

Anyways…

After I got on the block, my gaze widened and attached to two Chicago police cruisers parked in front of my shit. Slowing down, I wondered why the hell they were. Once I pulled into my driveway, I got out and glanced their way. One of the cops proceeded to get out of his cruiser. He was some older fat nigga, looking just like Carl Winslow.

"DeAndre Williams?" he asked.

I froze. "Yeah…That's me. What's up?"

The other cop hopped out his shit. He, too, was some fat nigga but he kind of reminded me of Judge Joe Brown. Man, these niggas were looking like some straight character. But as the two of them strolled closer to me, my heart began to thump.

"We need to take you down to the precinct for some questioning," the Carl Winslow-lookin' muhfucka said.

"For what?" I replied, my face twisted with surprise.

"In connection with a rape."

"Rape?!? What the hell are you talking about?"

"Look, brotha. You ain't under arrest yet but someone is claiming you sexually assaulted them. We need to take you down for questioning. You either comply or we're gonna slap some handcuffs on you," Judge Joe Brown grumbled.

"Fuck! Man, I swear me and that white girl had consensual sex. I didn't rape her."

"Okay, well, tell that to the detectives. If your story checks out, then you don't have nothing worry about, guy. Just take it easy. Now, do you want us to take you to the station or do you wanna follow us?"

“Man, ya’ll can take me and then bring me back ‘cuz in five minutes I’m finne clear my fucking name,” I said shivering. That goddamn white bitch! I swear! And something told me not to mess with that white bitch!

“Ok, well, get in the back of his car,” Judge Joe Brown said to me, pointing to Carl Winslow.

“Fine,” I replied and trailed the fat muhfucka to his cruiser. He opened the backdoor and I hopped in. Within five minutes, we made it to Chicago Police headquarters on 35th street.

Chapter Thirteen

Still pacing the floor in my room, I didn't know what else I could do. No solution to the out-of-nowhere rent situation was coming to my head.

A part of me wanted to run down to Pastor Shirley's office and ask her for help, but given that bible study was going on, I obviously couldn't do that at the moment. And then one bible study got done, there was no telling if she would say yes or no to my pressing financial need. Some days ago, when I started to make preparations to leave the halfway house program, Juanita, one of the workers here told me a lot of women end up right back in jail or in worse situations because they didn't do a diligent job of trying to securing housing. I was determined not to end up being a part of that number, so I needed to think of something quick.

Still pacing around, I almost wanted to breakdown and cry but now wasn't the time for me to get weak like this. "Please, God, please, give me a sign. A solution. Something. I need it right now, Lord. Please come through for me, I promise I will totally turn my life around if you come through for me. You've already brought me this far, please don't turn around on me now," I begged the Lord, hoping he'd hear my cry.

Not thinking of what else I could do, I realized there was no other thing I could think of but indeed ask Pastor Shirley for help. Hell. We had already had a talk earlier and her talk was very encouraging. Maybe I should go to bible study, I thought to myself. And that indeed I decided to do. My leg was starting to hurt me again, so I grabbed my cane, phone, and a bible and then quickly made my way out of my room.

Glancing down at my phone, it was now approaching nine PM. Pastor Shirley's bible study class usually went on to around ten pm. Once I got down to the conference where bible study was going on, I slowly creaked the door open, peeked my head in and saw the group of women along with Pastor Shirley sitting down in a circle.

Pastor didn't notice me walking in, so as she continued lecturing, I slowly walked up to the circle and then found an empty seat and sat

down. She paused for a moment, looked at me and said, “Hey! So glad you could join us, Sister Johnson. We’re reading from the second chapter of Galatians,” she said.

“Thank you, Pastor Shirley,” I smiled and then cracked open my bible.

~

It was nearly ten-thirty pm when we got done with bible study. We prayed and then we all gave each other a hug. As a few of my housemates began to exit the conference room, now was the time for me to go ahead and ask Pastor Shirley for some emergency help. I said a quiet prayer in the back of my mind and then approached her as she gathered her belongings.

“Pastor Shirley, can I speak with you for a moment?”

She paused and glanced up at me then turned her attention the other way. “What seems to be the issue? How did your doctor’s appointment go?”

I exhaled. I had to get my thoughts together. Every word I said now mattered. Although Pastor Shirley was a very nice and understanding woman, I still couldn’t help but think about what Donna said about Pastor Shirley that afternoon when she tried to get me to smoke with her. *Was this all one big front?*

“Great actually! My doctor said that the cancer actually is slowing down in growth and might be reversing. We’re gonna be trying some new therapies.”

“That’s so good to hear! I’m glad that things seemed to have turned around,” she said.

“Yeah…Well, I’d like to say thank you for those encouraging words you gave me earlier. I’ve just been battling with some depression and anxiety lately.”

“Understandable. I’m glad our talk this morning gave you a little boost.”

“Yeah…” I paused. “Pastor Shirley, the other reason why I wanted to speak with you is that just some hours ago I got a call from this apartment complex. I got approved for a unit that I could move into ASAP,” I said, my hands shivering with anxiety.

“Oh, that is great to hear! See, I told you faith works! You just gotta keep believing and be encouraged no matter what's going on!” she exclaimed.

Biting my lip, I had to get out what I really needed from her. “Yeah, well, there’s just one dilemma though. I need a thousand-dollar down payment by tomorrow.”

“Don’t you have money saved up from working?” she asked with

an eyebrow raised. "You virtually have no expenses living here."

“Yeah, kind of, sorta,” I confessed. “But not enough. Besides, I've been still having to buy medicine and other things I need for myself. I'm not making that much working here..."

“Well, have you talked to your family? Any relatives can come to your help?”

“I did but my sister doesn’t have the money and nor do some other folks.”

“Well, I’m so sorry to hear that, LaTrisha—”

“Pastor Shirley, do you think you could advance me the money on my next paycheck?” I quickly interrupted.

“Excuse me?” Her tone suggested I seemed to kind of catch her off guard.

“I know, Pastor Shirley. I’m sorry and I know this is probably the wrong place and time to ask but I’m in a serious bind now. I would’ve just waited until Monday and spoke to Juanita or one of the other case managers here but I figured since you were here, I could go ahead and ask. I mean, you're the boss and all.”

Pastor Shirley rolled her eyes and said, “LaTrisha, I wish I really could help but I can’t just take money out from the organization's budget and just give it to individuals. And the rules are pretty clear. We offer housing assistance through CHA. Juanita should've told you that. So, if you seek housing on your own, you would have to come up with your own deposit. Why didn’t you just get a CHA-approved apartment if you knew you wouldn’t have the money to get your own place?”

I hesitated for a moment but kind of grew irritated wondering why this woman wouldn’t even consider my plea. And it wasn't like I was asking her steal? Hell, if anything she could've dug in her own pockets and helped me. “I know, I’m sorry, Pastor Shirley. But those CHA-approved apartments just didn’t look safe. Some of them were too far south, too. I’m trying to get cust—”

“See, that’s where I’m gonna stop you right there," she said, suddenly interrupting me. "In life, sometimes you don’t have a choice about things. You gotta take what you're able to get. We can’t have everything we want out of life, missy. Hope is already on a limited budget. Although I’m the executive director, I still have to get every single dollar we spend approved by our board of directors. On top of that, we get federal grants in which every single dollar has to be accounted for. And all of it goes to our programming..."

“But Pastor Shirley, I understand—”

“I’m not done yet, LaTrisha. See, you know what the problem is with people like you. You all want your cake and you want to eat it, too. Honestly, I saw this coming from a mile away. And you had no

intentions really on coming to bible study. You came down here to get money. Plain and simple. Well, that's not gonna happen."

My mouth flung wide open. I was in disbelief that she was standing here chastising me for no apparent reason. Like, I didn't see ANY of this coming. But she continued verbally lashing me and said, "When I got out of prison, whatever resources I could get my hands on, I took it. You had the opportunity to work with one of our caseworkers and get into a CHA-approved apartment ASAP. You chose to go another route and we are supportive of that...just not financially. That's up to you and you knew that. So now you need to deal with the consequences of your poor decision making. You wouldn't be in this predicament if you would just be patient. But nope, now that you want this particular apartment, you think it's my responsibility to help you pay for something you really didn't need?"

Still not able to muster up the words to defend myself, I just stood there frozen and shocked. I didn't expect Pastor Shirley to be this cold and brutal with me.

She rolled her eyes and shook her head saying, "Anywho, I gotta get going. I've been trying my best to give you all the resources you need. I can only do so much." Once she had all of her stuff in her hand, she walked past me and made her way to the conference room door.

And that was when it hit me. Donna was probably right. Maybe not one-hundred percent right, but obviously Pastor Shirley had two, possibly three sides to her. Pastor Shirley was now showing another side of herself to me that I didn't even think she had in her possession. Just wow. WOW! Like I said, I didn't see any of her response coming at all. Before she left out of the room, I quickly had to say something though. See, I wasn't going to let this woman who I thought was my spiritual guide and mentor just run all over me in this way. I simply asked for some short-term help and suddenly this fat bitch made it seem like I was asking for a million dollars, a brand new house and a Mercedes…which was ironic, because that was how this big bitch was flaunting herself to us women. Sorry, I know I said I wasn't gonna be cursing but fuck all that. I was thirty-eight hot now. This shady hoe had us all geeked believing once we made the right life changes, we could accomplish what she had. Well, it seemed like maybe I had been fooling myself all along. Perhaps Donna was letting me know that Pastor Shirley truly was in this prisoner rehabilitation business simply for the money and not to help people.

"Before you go, Pastor Shirley, I just wanna say that you just pulled a fast one over me…"

Suddenly, Pastor Shirley scrunched her face, scanning me up and down with her judging eyes. "Excuse me, LaTrisha?"

“Yeah…Here I was, putting so much faith and stock in your word, thinking that if I truly needed help, you’d be there to help me. Honestly, I didn’t want to come down here and ask because I wanted to get things resolved on my own. And I was somewhat bracing for rejection or some excuse. But the way you just talked down to me. That shit was totally uncalled for. You're a fake ass bitch. And not even a good fake either because half the shit you wear looks like something you got out of a flea market. And now I feel like everything you told me earlier seemed like a lie. Yeah, maybe you do care to an extent. But it seems as though your care only goes so far. So long as it doesn’t interfere with your paycheck. But it’s cool though. I’ll find a way to get that apartment. Have a good night,” I said.

Pastor Shirley let out a slight chuckle shaking her head. I could tell I got under her skin. She stood there for a few more seconds until she finally said, “Like I said, I wish you the best of luck. We can only do so much.”

“Yeah, whatever, bitch,” I replied rolling my eyes. I knew I was totally out of character and out of line but the old Trish was back. I was tired of oscillating with this new found holy persona. Fuck this shit. Fuck this place. Fuck it all.

Pastor Shirley lowered and shook her head. I guess she couldn’t formulate the right response. She just stared at me and then finally walked out of the conference room. Some seconds later she came back and then said, “Lights will be out in thirty minutes, so I suggest you make it back to your room in time. Besides, since you’ll be leaving on Sunday, I guess you’ll need to start packing soon.”

“Sunday?” My eyebrow suddenly raised. Was this fat bitch now really going to fuck with me?

“Yeah…Sunday. You were scheduled to leave in a few weeks. Let’s go ahead and make that this Sunday since you think I’m full of shit,” she said and then walked back off. "Let's see how much help you'll get now that you won't get it from Hope anymore..."

Chapter Fourteen

This was the first time ever I had stepped foot inside of the police headquarters on 35th street, let alone a police station. This shit was like a massive armed fortress right on Chicago's South Side.

Following the two fat ass police officers into the headquarters, they quickly brought me to the detective's unit and I was told to sit in this small, chilly waiting lobby for a few minutes until a detective from the sex crimes unit would come and speak with me.

It was nearly ten PM and it felt like I had been waiting for hours for someone to come interview me about this bullshit ass allegation. I couldn't believe that white bitch would lie, too. See, this was exactly the reason why I didn't mess with those Becky bitches. Now my ass was caught up. Shit was un-fucking-believable. I mean, goddamn, you hear about this shit on the news, but you don't ever expect that some shit like this would happen to you. You know what I mean? Most of the time, you think the niggas that get caught the fuck up with these white hoes were probably some sheisty ass niggas any damn way. But now I see this shit could happen to anyone, including a dude like me who always treated women with the utmost respect. I'd never fucking rape a woman.

But I guess now in this moment, my convictions didn't matter at all. A woman accused me of raping her and now I gotta defend myself. This was some crazy fuck shit, I swear ta God! Truth be told, you already know a nigga was scared as fuck. Somehow though, I just knew if I told my story from A through Z, the white bitch's lies wouldn't stand.

Some minutes later, some tall, light-skinned nigga looking around fiftyish sauntered into the lobby. With this cheap black JC Penny's suit on, I knew this nigga was a straight-up square. At the moment, I had been going through my phone, going over the brief exchange of text messages between me and Melissa. While I waited, three other dudes, all white, were in the waiting area as well.

Crazy thing was the light-skinned nigga didn't hesitate in walking straight toward me. Guess he knew I was the suspect since Melissa probably told these muhfuckas "a black guy did it…" I could already

hear that white bitch's voice crying in the back of my head, sobbing like a toddler as she recounted her lies. I still couldn't believe that white bitch would set me up like this, I thought to myself as I kept my eyes latched onto this pig.

"DeAndre Williams?" buddy asked.

"Yes. That's me."

"Good Evening, sir. I'm Detective Wright. Please follow me. I just have some questions in regards to a report that was filed this mid-morning."

"Sure thing. I can clear my name," I responded.

Pursing his lips, he didn't say anything back. He just scanned me up and down, his eyes turned into judgmental slits. I stood up, adjusted my shirt and wiped lint off my pants. I then followed this Detective Wright back to a room past a few cubicles and other offices. Once inside this medium-sized dimly-lit room, which I presumed was an interrogation room, he pulled out a chair at a table and said, "Have a seat. Make yourself comfortable. I promise this won't take long."

"Okay," I replied and cautiously sat down. Anxiety was burning in my spirit. I should've been praying my ass off…

Detective Wright pulled out a chair adjacent to me and then sat down. A manila folder was already sitting on top of the table. He grabbed it and then opened it, quickly scanning a piece of paper.

"So, the reason why you're down here is because we had a young woman come down here and file a report stating that she had been sexually assaulted by you in your residence last night or rather this morning."

"Lies. I didn't do shit to that woman. She and I had consensual sex," I immediately stated. I wasn't going to let this nigga get me caught the fuck up.

"Okay, I'm not accusing you of anything. I'm just letting you know why we have you down here."

"Yeah, but still. I'm telling you that's a lie, Detective," I confidently stated. "As I said, the woman, Melissa, and I had consensual sex. I wouldn't dare do such a thing." "It's funny, too, 'cuz this all probably stems from the fact that she and I got into an argument before I kicked her out. I asked her if she wanted to kick it later on the week. I thought she was cool. But then she told me, 'I don't date black guys.' That obviously made me mad, so I kicked her out of my house. I told her that her sex was trash and so that probably explains why she's trying to get revenge…Something told me not to mess with that white girl."

"Hrrrm…Ok. Well, she's already been administered a rape kit. Before we dig any deeper into questions, are you willing to submit to a DNA test?"

My head shot back in surprise. This bitch was really going there. Wow! “A rape kit? What exactly does that entail?”

“Well, it depends. But we collect a wide variety of samples from the victim. Vaginal fluids, sperm, hair, clothing fibers, etc. We also take pictures of any bruising or marks that might indicate physical trauma,” Detective Wright said.

“Right! Exactly! There you go. I didn’t dare put my hands on her. I didn’t even punch or try to fight her. If anything, she was ultra-aggressive when we had sex,” I said. I already knew I was exonerated.

“Hrrrm…Well, she has plenty of bruising on her back and thighs. When she came in this morning, her lip was also busted, sir.”

I clasped my hands over my face and shook my head not believing what I was hearing. “Sir, I swear I didn’t do this. It sounds like she may have had another run-in with someone or she’s clearly trying to frame me,” I responded.

“Look, I’m not here accusing you of anything. All I am doing so far is getting your story and then we will further investigate.”

“Man, this is crazy as hell! I wouldn’t dare have to rape a woman to get any! That’s just not my style.”

“Well, how am I supposed to know that, Mr. Williams? How do I know you’re just not making this up? You know how many times I hear guys using your explanation? Of course you are obviously going to defend yourself,” the detective shot back.

Fuck!

I couldn’t say anything back. I felt like this nigga was somewhat trying to catch me in a tongue twister. I could see the want all in his eyes to trap me.

“But, brotha—”

“I’m not your, brother. And answer my question…Do you or do you not want to take a DNA test now? We can really do this the easy way or the hard way.”

“Man, this is so messed up! I feel like I walked into a trap. I need to speak to my attorney!” I demanded.

“You’re not under arrest yet, Mr. Williams. I’m just asking preliminary questions and gathering evidence. The case may or may not proceed into prosecution. Typically in cases like this, there is already a fifty-fifty chance they will proceed, but with DNA tests and administration of rape kits, we can generally determine what looks like a valid case. So again, do you or do you not want to take a DNA test?”

“Man, fuck it. I’ll go ahead and do it, but I wanna speak to my attorney after this.”

“You’ll be more than welcome to do so,” Detective Wright replied. “And as I said, you aren’t under arrest. We are just asking

questions…"

"Yeah, aiiiight!" I replied, doubt rolling off my tongue. I knew where all of this was headed. There were the questions at first. Next thing you know, my ass was gonna be thrown in a fucking Cook County jail cell, awaiting trial for some shit I knew for sure I didn't fucking do.

"Follow me. We'll have someone from the lab to come and draw blood and saliva. Then you'll be free to go back home. But once we get results, we'll bring you back in for further questions," Detective Wright said.

"Okay."

Moments later, Detective Wright took me down to the lab where a tech drew some blood from me and took a saliva sample. After I got done, Detective Wright told me that I should expect a follow-up call from him in the next twenty-four to forty-eight hours and that I'd better lawyer up.

Soon as I walked outside of the police headquarters, I called for a Lyft and made my way back home, floored that now I was days away from losing my mothafuckin' freedom over some bullshit rape allegations.

~

It was now nearly midnight and I was in my dark living room, sitting on my couch, wired to the tee. The television was blaring a rerun of Good Times. I couldn't sleep. Shit, how could I? Fear was running through my blood at a million miles per hour.

I was beating myself up mentally, telling myself I should've never fucked with that white bitch. Every life lesson I learned from my mama and others went down the drain. Shit, I could even hear Shelly's ass in the back of my head chastising me for my treatment of women.

This shit was just so unimaginable, and for a brief moment, I thought I was a dream. Hopefully, this entire rape investigation would end once the detectives pieced together enough clues to know Melissa's ass was definitely lying her ass off.

This was the first time ever in my life I'd ever been accused of raping a woman. Like, for real. Granted, I knew I wasn't the perfect guy and I made my fair share of mistakes when it came to my relations with women, but I wasn't no mothafuckin' rapist.

I was so mentally fucked up, I didn't even have the capacity to call anyone else and let them know what the fuck was going on. Shit, I was still trying to process all of this my damn self.

My chest began to tighten and I swore to God it felt like I was about to have a heart attack. "Calm down, Dre. Calm down. You

tweakin'. You're gonna be fine. You're not gonna get in trouble," I kept telling myself, delusionally assuring myself that nothing would come of all of this shit.

Bro, it would be a white girl who would do this to me. I felt so violated. Felt so vulnerable. I could literally see my life flashing before my eyes. I could see myself in prison, locked up for a decade, not able to see my own daughter and shit. Nah, this wasn't going to be me. I had to get myself out of this jam. I had to do something immediately.

"Oh fuck no!" I suddenly screamed when the reality of everything hit me. "This bitch ain't finne set me up. White bitch wanna lie on me, I'm gonna lie on her ass, too," I thought to myself, trying to figure out a way how to snake my way out this jam. I shot up from my living room couch and paced the floor, trying to think of a solution.

Tapping my chin, I mumbled aloud to myself possible solutions to this dilemma. But there really wasn't. It was just my word versus Melissa's. And in this day and age, rape allegations by any woman, especially a white woman, would land any dude in jail. I just knew I was guilty before proven innocent.

A situation like this made me regret not taking school seriously and that by now I could've been a lawyer and figured out how to get out of not only this fucked-up situation but even that bullshit I had going on with Trish. Although Detective Wright said that so far he was just gathering evidence and that there was a chance the case wouldn't go anywhere if the evidence didn't line up, I didn't want to believe that. That was just police talk. Reckless police talk at that. Hell, if I was a cop, I wouldn't even tell a suspect none of that shit. But none of this tangential-ass thinking mattered at the moment. I had to think of something NOW!

Then it hit me…

The only way to disprove I didn't do shit to this white bitch was that I needed a witness. Someone who could vouch I didn't do shit to this bitch.

But how would I get a witness? There was no one else in my bedroom. It was just me and Melissa. I mean, Myron and I kicked it at the bar that night. But he and I weren't even paying attention to the bitch. She didn't even cross my mothafuckin' radar until I had about a good ten shots up in me.

Think, Dre. Think. Think. Think. You're smart, nigga. Figure this shit out. You need a witness.

My thoughts kept rolling as I continuously paced the floor. Nothing came to me. Absolutely nothing.

But then it hit me…I needed someone who wouldn't mind covering for me. Someone who could understand the situation I had going on. My mind kept going to Myron. But I didn't know if I could trust that

nigga anymore. That shit he said last night at the bar had me still second-guessing that nigga…

For some odd reason, my mind kept floating Trish. I didn't know why. She would be the last person I'd call, even if I was dying from cancer and she had the mothafuckin' cure.

But then a sudden light bulb went off in my head.

She needed me right now more than anything. And truth be told, there was a slight possibility she could help me out. Maybe…Just maybe I could work out a deal with her and she could help me get out of this situation. But how would that work, idiot? I thought to myself. Yeah, how would that work? What the fuck would Trish lie about??!? And that bitch was all the way in a halfway house. I don't even know if I still had her cell phone number. I don't even know if she would even wanna deal with me in this manner.

"Fuck it," I said. I was going to call her and see if we could squash our beef in exchange for helping me. I didn't know how yet but I hope she'd at least give it a consideration. I knew I was being a tad irrational and stupid as fuck thinking she could help me…But I guess it was worth a try, right?

I lunged back over to my coffee table and grabbed my cell phone. I went through my contacts and luckily I never deleted Trish's phone number. I just had her number blocked. After I unblocked it, I quickly dialed her and held the phone up to my ear.

The phone kept ringing and ringing. And after about six rings I was ready to hang up. Then the phone went to voicemail.

"Fuck!" I growled. "Goddamnit!"

But literally, a second later, she called me back.

"Hello? Dre?"

My eyes widened with anxiety. "Hey, Trish…"

Chapter Fifteen

Fuck Pastor Shirley. Fuck this church. Fuck God. Fuck everything. Well, I don't know about the *Fuck God* part but yeah, like I said, fuck everything. I was over this shit. Pastor Shirley was nothing but a fake ass holy hoe.

That bitch thought she had one up over me. Gon kick me out her raggedy ass halfway house program early. Bitch, fuck you. I got her ass alright. I hoped karma would come back ten-fold on her ugly, fat ass.

Anyways, soon as my anxious ass left the conference room, I made my way back to my room and began to come up with an alternative plan. Truth be told, I wanted to breakdown, scream and even possibly fight a bitch, but I knew I had to keep my composure.

Pacing back forth in my room, the walls felt like they were closing in. I closed my eyes, said a prayer and then got a hold of myself.

"Fuck all of this shit," I mumbled to myself.

I needed to go back to do what I knew I did best. Sell this sweet pussy of mines. Granted, I may not looked the best at the current moment, but for the right price, any man could get his hands on this lil fire ass twat of mine. That seemed like that was going to be the only way I would get my hands on this $1,000 I needed to secure that apartment ASAP. I definitely wasn't going to let this dilemma boggle me the fuck down. No, ma'am!

Still frantically pacing my room back and forth, I needed to figure out what websites I could hop on and find me a client. Shit, I needed to find me some lonely ass cracka. From my previous experience, I knew it didn't take much to make a cracka cum and those were the types that paid top dollar. Hopefully, I could find me a white man with a nice, ole big dick, too, 'cuz these last two years of trying to be all saved and sanctified was drying my pussy up. I needed to fuck. Fuck all that shit. Yeah, I knew I sounded hella reckless right now, but like I said, I didn't give a fuck. Fuck all of this shit. All I had to worry about right now was not violating my probation requirements. And all that meant was I couldn't smoke no weed or do no drugs. I could drink though. Shit, I'd find me a nice white man, get pissy drunk and

pop this pussy all over him for a stack.

Right now I didn't need to pack. I needed to hop on my laptop and get on Craig's List or Backpages to see who wanted to get down with this sweet brown. But before I could make it over to my desk, my phone started buzzing in my pants pocket. Maybe that was Neicy calling me back letting me know she found someone who could lend me the $1,000. But it wasn't. It was actually Monique…Damn! Right in time 'cuz truthfully I was just talking shit about selling pussy. I didn't even know if I even had it in me to succumb that low and do some nasty, foul shit like that. I knew bestie could come through and lend me the $1,000 with no questions asked.

I answered the phone and quickly said, "Oh My God! Girl, please! I need your help!"

"Bitch, fuck you!" she angrily replied.

I instantly froze in place and then I already knew what the fuck was about to happen. *Fuck! Fucking Chadwick told her ass about us*, I thought to myself. "Excuse me?" I replied, faking as if I didn't know what convo was going to be about.

"Bitch, don't act like you don't know why the fuck I'm calling you. How could you do this to me? You fucked my man and had a kid by him? Bitch, you are as low as they come. You are pathetic. All that I did for you and you weren't even woman enough to come to me and tell me all of this? Bitch, I hope you die," Monique cried through the phone. She sounded so upset, that I damn near could hear the painful tears falling from her eyes.

"Monique! I wanted to tell you but I didn't know what to say! And Chadwick threatened me!"

"Yeah, yeah, yeah, bitch…You know, I really can't be mad at you. I feel like this is karma for me anyways."

"Huh? Monique, look, I can't explain! I really can," I responded, wiping tears from my face. Now I felt so low that I betrayed my best friend. I should've just been more upfront and honest with her. But this was all my fault. And I deserved all of this. But what the fuck did she mean by this was her karma?

"Nah! You don't have to explain shit. But I'mma just drop this dime on you and then you can be on your merry fucking way. Yeah, you may have fucked Chadwick and got pregnant by him. But guess what, bitch. I fucked Dre. Yup! Fucked him so many times, I lost count."

My mouth dropped and my eyes widened with surprise. "Huh? Nah! You did what?"

"Yeah! I fucked your baby daddy. And the dick was so good. And you remember that time you got that bad case of gonorrhea and you just knew Dre gave it to you? Well, guess who gave it to him, bitch? It

was me."

"Monique! You know what, hoe! Fuck you! Fuck you and fuck Dre! Bitch, no wonder you were so hellbent on trying to get back at Dre! Bitch, you were chasing some personal vendetta! Something told me you were on some other shit, too! And I can't believe I trusted yo ass after all these years! Bitch, if I catch you in the streets, I'm gonna whoop yo ass!"

"Yeah, whatever, hoe. How you gon do that with that bad ass hip of yours. Big Mama diabetic foot ass bitch! You big and bad, pull the fuck up hoe! But you can't 'cuz you ain't got shit and you will never have shit, broke ass, illiterate ass hoe!"

"FUCK YOU! Get off my line!" I screamed, suddenly hanging up the phone.

Enraged, I almost wanted to stop what the fuck I was doing, hop in an Uber and go all the way to the North Side to put my foot up that nasty bitch's ass. I couldn't even believe she would have the mothafuckin' gall to call me and confront me about Chadwick but then gon turn around and confess that she was fucking Dre and she was the reason why I came down with gonorrhea them years ago! That bitch was foul as fuck and now all of this made sense of why she harbored resentment for Dre.

"I'mma kill that bitch!" I growled, now back to pacing my floor. But I had no time to lose over this shit. Now that Monique was unexpectedly out the picture to provide me help, I was back to square fuckin' one. "Fuck it!" I said and dashed to my desk to hop on the net and find this white man. I needed that cash like yesterday! I needed it now. Fuck morals. I had to do what I gotta do. But I swore after I got done doing what I was about to hopefully do, I was gonna get my act right. I was over everything and everyone. Once I got my baby back from Dre's evil ass and got me a good ass job with benefits, a bitch was finne be straight.

My phone started buzzing again. Bet you it was Monique's ass calling me back to try to curse me the fuck out. Yeah, I didn't give a fuck about cursing anymore by the way. Like I said, I was too stressed the fuck out to be worried about trying to control my language. Fuck all of this shit. I grabbed my phone off the bed but then I was surprised to see the number flashing across my phone. It was mothafuckin' Dre calling me. What a fucking coincidence! But why in the fuck was this clown calling me this late at night? Did Monique call him and tell him she told me about them? Shit, truth be told, I was surprised he was calling me in the first place. I hesitated at first, debating whether or not I wanted to answer the phone. Rapidly tapping my right foot against the floor, I wondered what I should do next. Hrrrrm…Fuck him. He was probably on some late-night bullshit

and probably wanted to explain his situation with Monique. But I didn't have time for any of his shenanigans or his bullshit explanations. "I'll see yo ass in court, lying ass, fuck nigga," I mumbled to myself and threw my phone back onto my bed. I always knew he was cheating on me with another bitch. I just never thought it would be my own best friend. But you know what, you should never put anything past anyone these days. It be ya best friends, too, that'll do you in the most. Fucking bitch.

But then I paused for a moment and thought to myself.

"Hrrrrrm," I mumbled, tapping my chin, still thinking why in the fuck was Dre calling me.

As the phone get buzzing, a weird idea floated into my head. Maybe…Just maybe…And I knew this was going to sound like a crazy ass idea. But maybe I could work out some deal with him if he lent me the money I needed to get the apartment.

By the time I decided to answer the phone, I saw the call disappear. But then I quickly called him back. "Hello? Dre?" I immediately answered once the call connected.

"Hey, Trish…," he replied, his tone sounding off and dark.

"Umm, why you calling me? We really shouldn't be talking to each other until we go to court," I said.

"I know, I know. But look, I had been doing a lot of thinking and whatnot over the past few days."

"About what?"

Thinking? What was he thinking? I found it very odd he was calling now that Monique dropped that secret on me. Nigga was probably feeling hella guilty now. Granted, I made my fair share of mistakes and I cheated on him, too, but that was only out of long-held suspicion that he was doing me dirty with other bitches. And lo and behold, my intuition was right all along. And now I didn't regret a damn thing. Fuck him and fuck Monique.

"Well, listen, I'm not calling on some bullshit. You are right. You deserve to be in Ariyanna's life. It's wrong for me to deny you that right, especially if you trying to get your shit together," he explained. "I think we can work something out for the best of everyone. You know, at the end of the day, you already know how I feel about my daughter. I never wanted to put any harm on you. I just felt a certain type of way about the reckless ass decisions you were making," he said.

"Yeah, I hear you, Dre….I know I fucked up and made some mistakes, too, but the thing is, you don't do a good job of fessing up to the shit you put me through, too. Yeah, I cheated on you. Cheated on you several times, but you always made it seem like you never did any bullshit either. So, tell me, before we get any further into this

conversation. Tell me, did you ever cheat on me while we were together?"

Dre became silent. Yup, this nigga already knew he was guilty. Caught red-handed.

"Yeah…Yeah, I cheated…"

"Okay, and who you fucked while we were together? Do I know the bitch?"

I was just waiting for this clown ass nigga to tell me this bitch's name. Say it, nigga. Say it. Monique. Come on, fuck nigga. I'm ready.

"It was…It was Neicy."

"NEICY?!?!?"

"Yeah…Neicy…"

My eyes exploded with shock. "My fucking sister, nigga?!?!?"

Chapter Sixteen

"My fucking sister, nigga?!?!?"

Feeling caught, I had no other choice to admit to what I did. Yeah, it was kind of fucked up. But if I was gonna earn Trish's trust, I had to confess that I was a dog ass nigga. Yeah, I fucked Neicy. It was a long ass time ago and it was when Trish and I first started dating.

I hope this new revelation wouldn't suddenly make Trish apprehensive of trying to help me. 'Cuz God knows I really needed to see if she could help me out right now.

"But look, Trish. That shit was years ago when you and I first started dating. Shit, Neicy and I was drunk as hell."

"Nigga! You fucked my sister! I should kill you and that fat ass bitch! You two are both pieces of shit! But why the fuck did Monique just call me and tell me you two fucked as well?!?!?"

My head dropped and I closed my eyes, shaking my head out of shame. Damn. Once again I got caught the fuck up. Yeah, so I fucked Monique, too. That was some years ago, too.

"Damn…How the fuck did you know?" I asked.

"'Cuz the bitch called me and told me that she found out I was sleeping with Chadwick. And Chadwick told her all about the fling we had and what not!"

"Wait! Wait one mothafuckin' minute!?!? So, you was cheating on me with that nigga? That square ass muhfucka? A northside nigga at that?!?! Man, you was really on some other shit!" I angrily spat.

This back-and-forth we had was starting to get really intense and I just knew this wasn't going to end well. Ughhh! I was getting mad that this was even happening right now because this wasn't supposed to be the reason for me communicating with her.

"Man, bruh, so you was just fuckin' my friends and family. Un-fucking-believable. But it's cool though. I'm glad I got to do all the shit I got to do. Yup! Just like how I fucked Myron. Bet you didn't know that either, huh?" Trish confessed.

My eyes suddenly widened in shock and rage. "You fucked who?" I had to hear her say that nigga's name one more time.

"Yeah! You heard me right! I fucked Myron, too! And his dick was

so good. Better than that trash ass dick you walking around with, nigga!"

Scrunching my face in disgust and surprise, I smacked my teeth and said, "Bitch, fuck you! You lying! You just dropping names now!"

"Oh! You don't believe me? You want me to put us all on three-way so you can hear him beg for him to get a taste of my pussy?"

Hearing Trish go off like this was bizarre as fuck because the last time I saw this rank ass bitch, her ass was acting like a Jehovah's Witness and shit. Now this bitch was back to her old damn self, dropping all types curse words and expletives in the most ignorant ass fashion. But the more I thought about it, the more I realized this bitch was telling me the whole ass truth. She fucked Myron. My own muhfuckin' nigga fucked my bitch. Well, my ex-bitch. This shit was really blowing the fuck out of me right now. But it didn't surprise me, to be honest with you. At this point, I really didn't even care anymore. Everybody had pretty much fucked everybody.

"Trish…Listen to me for a sec. I fucked up. You fucked up. We all fucked up."

"Yeah! That's what the fuck it sounds like, mothafucka!"

"Look, bruh! Just calm down for a second. I'm trying to reason with you because I want us to squash this shit for the sake Ariyanna. I mean, even though you out here got me believing she ain't my daughter, I still wanna just dead this shit. I don't wanna involve no courts or nothin' like that."

"Dre…I wanna believe you so bad, but I just feel like you want something out of me. What is it? Just tell me," Trish said.

"I don't want shit for you. I just want you to not take my daughter away from me."

"But how you know she's even your daughter?"

"Look, bruh. We can go back and forth with that shit but any and everybody can tell Ariyanna is me and I am Ariyanna."

"Yeah, okay, well, you may be right. But you want something from me. What the fuck you want, Dre? Just be honest. Why you calling me all of a sudden?"

This is where I was gonna have to man the fuck up and tell her everything that was going on. "Trish, all bullshit aside, do you think I'm a rapist?"

"What? Nigga, what?"

"Bruh, for real. Although we had our problems, do you think I'm the type of nigga that is capable of raping someone?"

Trish was silent for a moment and then she answered, "No. I don't think so. But shit, you never know. What the fuck, Dre? What the fuck you got going on?"

"Man, listen. Don't judge me but the other night I fucked around

and messed with this white bitch I met at the bar. Make a long story short, me and the white bitch fucked. I thought she was cool and I wanted to see if she wanted to kick it with me later on this week and whatnot. But then the white bitch gon' tell me she don't date niggas. Ain't that some shit for you."

"Uh-huh. What else…"

"Well, later on that day, I went to go handle some business. By the time I came back to my crib, twelve was at my door teling me some detectives wanted to interview me because the white bitch is claiming I raped her…"

"Nigggga…Like what the fuck, Dre?!? You raped her?!?! Nah, you're fucked up! I gotta go!"

"NOO! I ain't rape that white bitch, man! That's what the fuck I'm tryna say!"

"So what the fuck you want me to do?!?!?"

"Bruh! Please, listen, I need you to help me and say you were a witness."

"Dre! How in the fuck can I even do that if I am all the way out here at this damn halfway house!?!? How can I even come up with a believable alibi? Man, you fucking tweaking right now, fa real! And then you want me to lie to some cops of your bullshit?!? Boy, you got me fucked up. Goodbye!"

"Trish! Please, I'm for real. I wouldn't dare do this shit to no female. I swear on my grandmama's grave I wouldn't do some foul shit like that. And you know me!"

"Yeah, yeah, yeah! Good luck, Dre! You know…Between you fucking Monique and Neicy and now this shit, you just gave me every fucking good ass reason why I really need to get my daughter back. Guilty or innocent, I ain't helping you with shit! Goodbye!"

Suddenly Trish hung up the phone.

"FUCK!" I shouted and then threw my phone across the living floor! I was so pissed right now. My entire plan back-fired like a mothafucka! Now I knew for sure I was going straight to jail.

Since I couldn't take this anxiety anymore, I needed to go get drunk as fuck. "Man, fuck this shit! I'mma kill my fucking self!" I screamed as reached down at the coffee table, grabbed my wallet and keys and then stormed over to my phone lying on the floor. I grabbed it and saw that Trish was calling me back. "Please, bruh!" I quickly answered.

"Man, calm the fuck down. If you want my help, then you gotta help me!" she said.

"Okay! Anything!"

"Anything?"

"Yeah! Whatever you need, I got you!"

“Oh okay! Well, I need a place to stay until I get back on my feet.”

“What?!? Nah!” I replied, smacking my teeth.

“You said you need my help, right?!?!?”

“Yeah!”

“Well, I need a place to stay and I need $2,000 to get this apartment. You do that for me and I’ll help you out in this situation. Oh, and I want you to give me split-custody over Ariyanna. We trade weeks.”

I had to think about this shit for a moment. Man, her crazy ass wanted to stay at my place and give her $2,000?!?! The only thing I couldn’t wrap my head around was her then trying to get split-custody over Ariyanna. I didn’t feel comfortable with that shit at all and she knew it. What the fuck?!? But seeing as how I was pretty much between a rock and a hard place, I gave in. “Fine…We’ll work out a deal. When can you get here?”

“Pick me up tonight…I’ll be ready,” she said.

“Bet. Text me your address and I’ll be there…”

Chapter Seventeen

"You got a nice ass place, Dre," I commented as I walked out of his shower fully naked.

"Man, put some fucking clothes on," he groaned from his bed. He was laying down watching television when I stumbled out of the bathroom with no clothes on.

"What? You act like you ain't never seen me naked before," I said.

"Yeah, but we're not together and—"

"And what?" I interrupted. "I know my body isn't what it used to be. But I have no shame. I'm just thankful to be alive. So fuck your feelings. Besides, I asked you to leave but you didn't want me to. So, bam, take that."

Dre was acting so paranoid, he didn't want to leave the room. Guess he thought I was going to go through his shit while he wasn't watching. It was like 2 AM in the morning and after Dre picked me up from Hope, we went straight back to his place. Ironically, it didn't take me long to pack because I didn't have much stuff. Don't even know why Pastor Shirley gave me until Sunday to get the fuck out. But whatever. I was gone now Buh-bye, bitch!

"Yeah, well, still, we not together," he said. "So, let's go ahead and talk about this plan."

"So, wait. We didn't have much time to talk about in the car but you need to recap to me what exactly fucking happened. 'Cuz I don't know. I still feel a bit iffy about all of this, Dre. I mean, how can I really trust that you aren't lying."

Dre smacked his teeth and rolled his eyes. "Damn, girl. Like, what's the point of you even being here right now if you are gonna doubt everything I'm telling you. Like for real, I didn't do shit to that woman. I swear to God," he said.

"Okay, well, I believe you, damn. I'm just saying though. I'd feel a certain type of way if you got me lying for you knowing damn well you really did that shit."

Dre produced this nasty gawk at me and said, "Look at me. Do I really look like the type that needs to rape a bitch, let alone a white bitch, just to get some ass. Truth be told, I went damn near two years

without fucking."

"What?" I exclaimed. "Nigga, you lying! Two years?!?"

Now Dre knew he was a goddamn lie if he was gonna lay there and run me that bullshit. Knowing this nigga, he couldn't go three days without pussy.

"Dead ass serious. Except for the other night, of course," he replied.

"WOOW! So you and I both was some celibate ass muhfuckas, huh?" I laughed.

"I guess so," he said, producing a slight smile. Damn. That was a smile I kind of missed about Dre. He was looking so tired and vulnerable right now, but he still had a certain degree of cuteness to him that from time to time I missed. He was such a sweetheart early on our relationship when we were together. Oh well. Fuck him still though.

"Well, like I said, I believe you. And on that note, when you gon' run me my money? 'Cuz I can't help you until you send me my coins," I demanded.

"Damn. Shit. Fine. What's your CashApp?" he asked as he reached over to his nightstand and grabbed his phone of its charger.

"Dollar sign-TRISH4CHRIST," I replied.

"So, what's up that by the way?" Dre asked.

"What's up with what?"

"You really saved and shit?"

I didn't know what to say because I was still on the damn fence myself. I wanted to keep believing but now I truly didn't care anymore. "Well, yes and no. I mean, I was cool up until recently. A lot of shit will make you start questioning things. Anyways, I don't wanna talk about that right now. We need to talk about this story we need to run the police. So, what ideas you got?"

"Shit…I think you can say you were here visiting me and we got into an altercation and you saw Melissa and shit. And she definitely wasn't acting like a rape victim and whatnot," Dre explained. "I think the police will kind of buy that."

"Nah, I don't know about that," I replied shaking my head. "I mean, think Dre. You supposed to be the college grad and all. How is that proof you still ain't raped that white girl?"

"Okay, well, what do you recommend?" he asked. The slight annoyance in his voice made me know he thought he had this shit all figured out but he obviously didn't. Dude was such a know-it-all but didn't know shit. This nigga was definitely destined for jail if I didn't come to his rescue.

"Well, I'm glad you asked…But give me a moment, let me put my shit on," I said.

“Okay,” he replied.

I spent the next five minutes putting on a quick outfit and then threw a bonnet over my head and made my way into the actual bedroom. “I need a drink. You ain’t got no Henny here?” I asked.

Dre smacked his teeth and said, “Girl, it’s almost 3 AM in the morning and you wanna drink right now?”

“Please? I ain’t have a drink in years. I need something just to loosen me up and make me think of some more ideas and whatnot.”

“I guess…I got some weed, too…,” he replied with a raised brow. “You wanna smoke? ‘Cuz I’d rather get high.”

I stood there and thought for a second. Suddenly my conscience kicked in and was begging me not to succumb to the THC-temptation. But damn, fuck all that. I wanted to get high and drunk. It was time to live life a little. If I got drug tested, I’d just take some niacin pills.

“Sure,” I replied.

“Cool, I got vape pen,” Dre said as leaned over and rummaged through his nightstand and pulled out a vape pen. He took a few tokes and then passed it to me. I ain’t never smoked out of one of those before but I guess I was willing to try. “What in the hell is this? You get high off this?”

“Hell yeah. Just try it. It’s Pineapple Express. Good ass strain,” he said.

“Okay,” I replied reluctantly as I grabbed the vape pen out of his hand and wedged it between my lips. I cautiously took a few tokes, taking in the sweet, tangy aroma. “Damn, this taste good as hell. Where you get this from?”

“One of my guys on the job. I used to get them from Tanisha but you know…”

“Yeah…I’m sorry about that, too,” I said as I began to lightly cough. “Damn, this hit kind of strong, too.”

“Yeah. Be careful with that,” he said. “Shit gon have you on a different planet in a few.”

“Shit, I need to be.”

“How’s everything with your health?” he asked.

I took a deep breath and closed my eyes. “Fine,” I smiled lightly. “Just managing. The doctor told me my cancer might be slowing down. So, I’m supposed to be trying this new therapy soon to see if it helps.”

“Good to hear, I guess.”

“Yeah…Anyways, enough about that. Where’s the henny?”

“Haha, well, let’s go in the living room,” Dre said as he proceeded to get up from the bed and then march to his bedroom door. I got up and then followed him.

As we walked through the hallway, I was still so amazed that Dre

was able to get this expensive ass townhouse in Hyde Park all by himself. I must say that although Dre had his doggish ass ways, he was definitely doing so good for himself. It was obvious he was serious about life and taking care of his shit, especially Ariyanna. And that I admired a lot about him.

Now back into the living room, I crashed on the couch while he went into his kitchen and came back out with a bottle of Henny and two red cups. The weed he gave me moments ago was starting to kick in and I was beginning to feel so nauseous. But in a good way.

"Damn, this shit is starting to hit me hard," I said, feeling my head getting lighter and lighter as each second passed.

"Yeah, I told you that shit was strong," he said with this slight, devilish smile. "You'll be straight though."

"Yeah…," I replied, rubbing the side of my head.

Dre sat the two cups onto the coffee table in front of the couch and poured a hefty serving into each. He then handed me a cup. "You gon be good?" he asked.

"Yeah, I'm straight," I said, feeling even hazier, but in a good ass way. This weed was definitely making me feel so relaxed.

"This shit is good as hell," I said. "Damn…"

"Yeah. Well, don't pass out just yet 'cuz we still gotta talk about this plan."

"I know," I responded. "So, I think you gotta say we did a threesome."

Yeah. I know. That idea sounded crazy as hell but it was the only thing that made sense to me at the moment. Dre needed to be willing to hear me out so he could see why my idea would make sense, too.

"WHAT?!?" Dre responded. "What is you talkin' about? A threesome?"

"Listen…Just hear me out. I knew you were gonna have that response but it's the only thing that's gonna make sense to a Detective. Just listen…"

"Okay. I'm listening," Dre responded doubtfully.

"Well, if I say I was there with ya'll and having sex with ya'll, I can be the third witness. I mean, it's your word versus hers. But if I said I was there, then I can contradict everything she said."

"Damn…I guess…"

Chapter Eighteen

Trish was crazy as fuck for making this suggestion. Threesome? Really? This bitch was off her rockers but the more I thought about it, the more I realized she may have been onto something. It would make perfect sense for her to claim the three of us were doing some sort of threesome. The white bitch then couldn't dispute anything that Trish said happened that night.

But there was just one simple problem with Trish's idea. How in the fuck can she even prove I had sex with her?

"Well, the idea sounds like it could work. But the dilemma is how am I gonna prove that you and I were doing something together? Shit still sounds a bit shady, don't you think?"

"Yeah, that's true. I mean, they may ask me to take a test or something to see if I got your sperm in me, I guess," Trish said as she took a sip from her drink.

"Yeah, see, no, this shit ain't gon work. How the fuck is that gonna even happen?"

Trish chuckled. "Let me see that vape pen again," she said.

"Man, bruh, you tweakin' right now. You starting to get too high and drunk as fuck right now," I said. Man, I knew I should've never gave her silly ass that vape pen. "And aren't you on probation? Should you even be smoking?"

"Boy, bye! I sat up here and gave you the best idea in the world. Let me get that pen!"

"Fine!" I said as I pulled it out of my pocket and handed it to me. "But you still ain't answer my question! How the fuck am I gonna prove I got sperm inside of you unless we fuck or something??!"

"You just answered your own damn question," Trish responded as she took some pulls from the vape pen and blew vapor in my face.

I smacked my teeth. "See, now you on some other shit."

"Well, Dre, I don't know what else to tell you. The only way maybe is for you to go beat ya dick and then bust in a napkin and then I could put it inside of me."

"Man, nah! You on bullshit for real right now. I don't even know why my stupid ass even came up with this idea of trying to use you!"

Suddenly Trish got mad and said, “Fuck you. Yeah, your stupid ass needed my help alright! But Dre, you ain’t got no other solutions to this shit. I’m trying to reason with your lame ass!”

“Man, give me my money back! I don’t wanna do this shit no more.” Trish was on bullshit and I didn’t even know why I succumbed and had her up on my shit now. See, this is exactly what happens when you get too desperate.

“No. I ain’t going nowhere. And I ain’t giving you MY money back. We had an agreement. Now go beat ya dick and bring it back to me in a napkin.”

“But, Trish, you’re gonna get pregnant! Fuck you talm’bout with yo super-fertile ass.”

“Really, Dre? Nigga, I have cervical cancer. I cannot have children, dummy.”

I suddenly got quiet and realized I may have fucked up and said some foul shit. Trish suddenly scrunched her face and looked the other way.

“Damn. I’m sorry. I didn’t know.”

“Yeah, yeah, yeah…Be sorry. That’s why it’s fucked up you wanted to take Ariyanna away from me,” she cried. “I can’t have children anymore, Dre. She’s all I got,” she sobbed as tears ran down her face. “Anyways, look, just do what you gotta do. I’mma be in the other bedroom, okay?” she said as she sat her red cup down on the coffee table and immediately got up from the couch.

“I’m sorry, Trish.”

“Yeah, whatever. Like I said, it’s the only thing I think is gonna work,” she replied as she made her way down the hallway and into the guest bedroom.

Feeling kind of bad, I downed the rest of the Henny in my cup. I looked at the Henny bottle, which still had about a good fifth left, and grabbed it. I downed the rest of the bottle in one swig. This shit was getting crazier by the minute.

Threesome. Threesome. Beat off in a napkin. My thoughts kept running wild as the alcohol began to loosen me up a bit. “Fuck it,” I said as I got up from the couch and made my way into the guest bathroom in the main hallway. Once inside, I sat down on the toilet, whipped my dick out and then grabbed my phone to look at some porn. As dumb as fuck I thought Trish was, she was actually somewhat a genius for this idea because it was the only thing that made sense at the moment. I guess all of that ratchetness was cloaking some hidden intelligence.

Once I pulled up PornHub, I quickly searched for some BBW porn. Once I settled on a particular clip, I played it, and then placed my phone on the edge of my bathroom’s radiator. My dick getting hard, I

began to stroke myself hoping I could get this shit over in a few minutes.

But, ughh…This porn wasn't doing shit. My dick could barely get erect. I just wasn't feeling this idea. Or maybe I had too much to drink.

"Fuck it," I said as I stood up and quickly pulled my pants up. If this idea is gonna work, I'mma do shit the right way.

Chapter Nineteen

Although I knew it was a crazy ass idea, I knew it was going to be only logical thing to help Dre get out of his bind. But I be damned if he was gonna sit there and belittle me like that, especially given I couldn't get pregnant.

The more I thought about it though, the more I no longer felt comfortable even helping Dre out anymore. Telling this big ass lie to cover for him still just didn't sit right with me. Besides, I still didn't know if this nigga was lying about this entire rape situation. *Fuck him. This is a bad ass idea*, I thought to myself as I laid in the bed.

Truth be told, I should just get up and leave. I should just give him his money back and just head over to Neicy's place. I needed to talk to that hoe anyways to see if it was even true that she fucked Dre. But at this point, I didn't even care about that shit. That was years ago. Right now, I was just trying to get my life settled. All I wanted to do now was find a secure place to stay, get a good job, go back to school and try to rebuild some relationship with Ariyanna. That was all I cared about at the moment. Honestly, I felt like Dre kind of exploited me and the more I thought about it, the more I just wanted to run back into the room and fight him.

I shot up from the bed and dashed over to the door but soon as I got to the door I heard two knocks. "Trish," Dre muttered.

"What you want Dre?!?"

"I'm sorry. Just open the door," he said.

"The fuck for what? You got the napkin with your sperm in it?" I definitely wasn't going to do that shit so let me go ahead and tell his ass right now I wasn't down. "Dre, I don't wanna do this no more," I said.

"Just open the door, Trish."

"Fine!" I flicked the room light on and then opened the door. My eyes widened with shock when I saw Dre standing there with no clothes on except his boxers.

Suddenly confused, I scanned him up and down, taking in his body. I couldn't lie though. Dre definitely still had a nice body but why in the fuck was he naked?!?

“Dre??! What the hell?!?”

“Look. I can’t beat my meat. Let’s just fuck and get it over with,” he said.

“Nigga is you crazy?!?! I’m not fucking you!”

“Trish, it’s the only option. You were right. Besides, I can’t get my shit up. Help me.”

“DRE! You have lost your mothafuck—”

Without hesitation, Dre leaned in, grabbed me and started planting kisses all up and down my face and neck. “Boy, get off me! NO!” I protested, almost wanting to fight him off.

“It will be quick,” he said in between the kisses he kept landing all up and down my neck.

“DRE!” I continued yelling but those kisses felt so good. Honestly, I hadn’t had someone hold me and make love to me like this in a hot ass minute. “Dre…,” I groaned again, but this time I was so turned on, probably because of that Henny and weed, that I was ready to do whatever.

Fuck it.

“Shit, that feels good,” I moaned as Dre pushed up against the wall and began to slowly grind on me. Feeling his thick ass dick slide up and down my pussy was already sending me into a frenzy.

“Oh my god, Oh My GOD! I’m cumming! OH MY GOD!”

“Really?!?” Dre said as he looked at me somewhat surprised.

“Yes! I ain’t fucked in a minute! Fuck it! I need some dick!” Not caring anymore, I grabbed his face and returned a basket of kisses, licking his face, ears, and side of his neck. The two of us were moaning together and he continued to grind on me.

“FUCK!” I screamed as pushed him off me and then switched sides, pushing him against the wall. I suddenly dropped to my knees and pulled his boxers down. His dick flung out rock hard. I grabbed his shaft and began to suck on it, going up down his veiny dick, giving him the wettest head I knew how to give. Yeah, I used to talk so much shit about Dre’s dick but truth be told, he, too, had a pretty ass big ass dick. One that I desperately needed up in me right now.

“Fuck! Keep sucking that shit!” Dre groaned as he pushed my head up and down. Slobbering the tip of his dick, I circled around it with my tongue. I could feel his precum already oozing.

I couldn’t take it anymore. I stood up and then as we made out, he pushed me toward the bed then laid me down. He quickly ripped my clothes off and then took his boxers off. Once he got my panties off, he spread my legs and dived right in between me, instantly devouring my insides.

“FUCKKKKKK! OH MY GOD!” I screamed as I felt him wrap his lips around my clit and suck on it like a lollipop. “FUCK, I’m CUMMING!”

I screamed, and next thing you know I was squirting all over the place.

“You want this dick? You ready for it?” Dre asked seductively.

“Hell yeah! Give it to me!”

He quickly stood up, pulled me closer to him and then spread my legs. My pussy already soaking wet, he slid right in and began to stroke my walls. My pussy tightened around his dick and we went at it for the next two hours, fucking like the world was about to end in a few hours.

Chapter Twenty

The following morning, I woke up and saw Trish snuggled up next to me. Wiping the coal out of my eye and rubbing the side of my head, I couldn't believe I ended up sleeping with this woman. My fucking baby mama. My cancer-stricken, crazy ass baby mama at that.

Oh well…It is what it is.

Hey, don't judge me but I had to do what I had to do. This entire idea sounded wild and stupid as fuck, but at this point, I had to be preemptive. I'd be damned if I was gonna end up like some nigga you'd see on the news who got his life fucked up all over some white pussy. White pussy that wasn't even that good at that. Fuck that. Ya'll got me fucked up if you thought I was gonna be up in some prison, letting some nigga think he gon fuck me in the ass. Hell no.

I glanced down at Trish. She slowly opened her eyes and looked at me. Suddenly a look of surprise came over her. "Oh my God! What did we do?!?!" she asked as she let me go. Quickly pulling the sheets back over her body, she moved to the corner of the bed. "Did we…Did we fuck?" she asked.

"Yeah," I said.

"Oh my mothafuckin' goodness…. I cain't…I fuckin't cain't!"

"Yeah, I know right. I guess we had a little bit too much to drunk. Oh well. We still down for the plan, right?"

"Yeah…I guess….," Trish responded, looking at me with doubt laced in her face. "Dre…Did you cum in me?"

"Yeah…Pussy was too good, I guess," I confessed, somewhat smiling.

"Damn…Welp. I cannot believe we did this. Like, I feel like I'm in some alternative universe or some shit."

"I know right. But hey, it is what is, right?"

"I guess…

"Well, I guess we better get ready to head down to the police station," I said as I got out of the bed and then made my way into the bathroom. Now that I was sober and had a good look at Trish, I was still floored that I would do this. I mean, she wasn't ugly but she definitely wasn't the same. She was a good twenty pounds lighter,

semi-frail and had a pall to her. I guess all those cancer treatments had some side effects on her skin. She looked like she aged a good ten years.

Honestly, I felt kind of bad for her because she would've probably been in a different situation if I wasn't so hard on her. There was a part of me that felt like I had some responsibility for her going to jail in the first place. But hell, that was water under the bridge. And I couldn't fault myself for her bad decisions. I made bad decisions, too, but I had to take full ownership of my shit. She needed to do the same. But now that she and I were willing to come to a compromise and help each other out, especially for the sake of Ariyanna, I think I had to do everything in my power to make sure she was good.

As millions of hot beads hammered my head, I let go of our fucked up past. I let the hot water drown away all of the bad blood she and I had. It was time to move on. The first thing I was gonna do when I got back to work was talk to my job's HR department and see if I could help Trish get a job. Shit, everyone deserved a second chance. I was also gonna talk to one of my guys, Garrett, who was into real estate. He rented section 8 units. Hopefully, I could see if he could cut Trish a deal and get her a better place so she and I could be closer once she got back on her own two feet. And then I could co-sign on a car for her so she could get a whip as soon as possible. Yeah, I just gave her two stacks so she could get her own place, but I had plenty of money in the bank. She could keep that money and use it to buy furniture and whatnot. See, my whole thing was, I wanted to prove to her that although we still had a lot of issues to hammer out, we could make this co-parenting shit work. I had to let go of all of my past grudges and try my best to make sure the mother of my child had her shit together. I knew mama was gonna be thirty-eight hot with me, too, when she found out I was helping Trish get back on her feet. But oh well, Mama could be mad all she wanted, but this was my life. She made bad decisions when it came to laying up with my rotten ass, absentee father, so she had no right to criticize me if I was trying to help a woman in need.

Damn…Was I sounding like a sucker right now? I wondered to myself as I turned off the shower. Nah…This was the right thing to do. I had a lot of growing up to do. Even though Trish and I were about to do some stupid shit and possibly get in trouble for lying to the police, once I got out of this jam, I was determined to walk a straight line for the rest of my life. That meant no more messing around with random women. No more lying. No more manipulation. No more dog ass shit. The next woman I got with, I was going to do everything in my power to do right by her.

Soon as I popped in the shower, it completely slipped my mind

that I needed to call up Shelly so we could arrange a time for Ariyanna and me to come over and hang out with her. Although I was still somewhat upset at the shit she said to me, I guess she had a point. So, it was every intention of mine to call her and apologize. I didn't want any bad blood between her and I and at this point it was just time to be a fucking adult all the way around. I didn't want to keep having these fucked up relationships with all the women in my life. Shit, truth be told, maybe it was God who put me in this crazy situation that made me realize why I needed to have Trish back in my life. Although it was too early to tell at the moment, I hoped she truly was going to start to make better decisions about her shit. And no, don't get it twisted. We just fucked. I didn't want any relationship with her at this moment. We could co-parent.

After I took a shower and hopped in an outfit, I made my way back into the bedroom. From the sound of it, it sounded like Trish was in the other guest bedroom taking a shower. I hopped in my bed for a sec just to cool off when I saw my phone buzzing away. I grabbed it and saw a 773 number calling me. Not knowing who it was, I grew nervous. Shit, this could've been that fucking detective. I quickly answered. "Hello?"

"Mr. Williams?" I heard a male voice answer on the other end. Sounded just like that Detective Wright muhfucka.

"Yes. Detective Wright?"

"Yes, this is him. How are you doing today, sir?"

"I'm…um…I'm doing fine. I was just about to run down to the police station to talk to you about what happened that night."

"Don't waste your time. The investigation has been closed."

"Huh? What happened?" I replied, my brow raised out of curiosity.

"Well, you're an innocent man, Mr. Williams. Turns out Ms. Melissa's boyfriend is the actual person who physically and sexually assaulted her. She came in early this morning and confessed that she made up the entire thing in trying to defend her boyfriend. I really apologize that you got caught up in all of this," he said.

My eyes widened with shock, I cupped my mouth, almost ready to pass the fuck out. "Yoooo! You've got to be fucking kidding me!"

"I'm not kidding. She and the boyfriend are currently under arrest. She's being charged with falsifying a police report and obstruction of justice. The boyfriend is being charged with rape."

"Wooooooooooooow!" I damn near wanted to cry as I felt millions of butterflies invade the pits of my stomach.

"Mr. Williams…Word of caution. Just be careful who you meet. Sex ain't that good to end up in jail," he said. "You take care of yourself and good luck with everything. Have a good day."

"You do the same, sir. Thank you," I replied and hung up the

phone.

Soon as I hung up the phone, I popped up from the bed, ran out of my bedroom and into the hallway screaming, “TRISH! TRISH! YOU WON’T BELIEVE WHAT THE FUCK HAPPENED!!!!”

When I cut the corner and made my way to the bathroom, I saw that the door was wide open and the shower was running. Curiously looking around, I then made my way back into the guestroom where she had her shit at and saw everything was gone. “The fuck?!?!?”

With my phone still in my hand, I glanced down, pulled up her contact in my phone and dialed her but the phone went straight to voicemail. “What the fuck?!?! Did this bitch take off?!?! What the hell!?!?”

Instantaneously, extreme rage filled my core and every muscle fiber in my body was ready to hop in my Charger and go hunt that bitch down. Bitch thought she was slick! I didn’t even know why I the fuck I trusted her ass in the first place! Something kept telling me this bitch was going to finesse the fuck out of me!

“You’re fucking retarded, Dre! You stupid ass! You knew what the fuck this bitch was capable of!” I screamed to myself as I rapidly paced the hallway floor trying to figure out what I was gonna do next. I can’t believe I just let this bitch spend the night, drink my liquor, hit my vape pen and then gave her some dick. Worse of all, I JUST GAVE THIS BITCH TWO STACKS.

Let it go, Dre. Let it go. Karma’s a bigger bitch than she is, I heard a voice suddenly say.

“AHHHH! FUCK!” I growled shaking my head as I made my way into the living room and collapsed onto my couch. In total disbelief, I felt robbed. I felt exposed. I felt exploited. But you know what, like that voice just told me, karma’s a bitch. Yeah, I just lost two stacks but whatever. Like I said, I had plenty of money in the bank. In the end, maybe this was another sign that perhaps Trish was far from redemption. That bitch is a loser and she was gonna regret pulling that fast one over on me.

After I managed to calm my anxiety, I suddenly let out a big laugh. Wow! The universe had to have been looking out for me because maybe had I ran down to the police station with Trish’s ass and ran Detective Wright that story, I could’ve been in some serious ass trouble. I didn’t even know why I would even succumb and think of such a stupid ass idea in the first place.

Buzz. Buzz. Buzz.

My phone started vibrating. “This probably this crazy bitch right here,” I said as I quickly glanced down at my phone and saw that it was Shelly. I quickly answered and said, “Damn, I was just meaning to call you.”

"Oh, were you?"

"Yeah. Look, I just wanted to apologize for my behavior the other night. That was totally uncalled for. You were right. I have a lot to learn and I wanna make sure you and I are on the same page when it comes to raising our son."

"No need to apologize, Dre. Actually, that was why I was calling you. I wanted to apologize. I think I was being a bit too judgmental and harsh. I think sometimes I can get a bit carried away, but it's cool though. I'm just glad you and I are on the same page," she said.

"True. Well, I appreciate that. I wanted to swing by later today with Ariyanna. You still got an open schedule?"

"Yeah. I do…I wanna meet that little cutie pie of yours!"

I smiled. "True. How's Junior doing?"

"He's good. I just took him to go get a haircut. He's starting to look more and more like you, I swear," she said.

"Hahah, wow. Ok, well, I'm about to get ready and head out."

"Okay, cool. I'll see you later. And thank you for apologizing. We're gonna be fine. We got this," she said.

"Thanks, Shelly. I'll see you soon," I said and then hung up.

It hadn't even been a second after I hung up that I immediately got a text from Trish. At first, I wanted to immediately delete the message but then I went ahead and read it.

"Nigga you got me all the way fucked up if you think I'm gonna lie 4 u. Thank you for the dick though. And don't even try to get your money back from CashApp. Fuck with me and I'll fuck with you. I'll run down to the police and tell them everything that happened. And we still goin' to court, pussy nigga."

"Wow. Whatever," I said to myself as I quickly deleted the message. She could have the money. I didn't care but as far as Ariyanna was concerned, she could forget about that shit. If this was the game she wanted to play then we can play it alright. Loser ass hoe. Then again, could I blame her for taking off? Nah, not really. I mean, I was kind of putting her in a bind by trying to lie for me. But damn, she could've at least been woman enough to tell me she wasn't down for the game. Truth be told, I probably would've just told her to keep the money and go on about her merry way. But like I said, it is what it is.

I trekked toward my kitchen, wanting to make something quick to eat before I swung over to my mama's place to pick up Ariyanna. As I slid past the dining room table, I saw a mound of mail piling up. It seemed like I hadn't opened any of my shit in some days. I picked up the mound of mail and went through each, sorting through bills and junk. Hell, eighty-percent of this shit was junk anyways. Once I got to the last letter, I saw an envelope from "American Life Mutual

Company". The envelope looked legit as hell but I didn't know if this was some marketing material or a real letter from a life insurance company. "What in the hell is this?" I groaned to myself as I opened up the envelope. Quickly scanning the letter, my eyes widened in surprise. Tanisha listed me as a beneficiary on her life insurance policy, according to the letter. And after a thorough review, they were paying out $150,000 to me. "OH SHIT! WHAT THE FUCK?!?!?!?!"

Chapter Twenty-One

An hour earlier…

"You crazy as fuck if you go and help that nigga," Myron angrily spat at me as I sat on the toilet inside of Dre's guest bathroom. As the shower ran, I started to second-guess once again whether or not I should help Dre out with this shit.

I had to weigh my options and I needed a voice of reason to help me see through this situation. That was why I called Myron to get his quick input. I knew he'd look out for me.

"I know. It sounds crazy as hell, but what am I gonna say, Myron?!? I mean, he even gave me $2,000 and I need the money."

"Man, fuck him and his money! Look, stop being so simple and realize what the fuck you getting yourself into. If you run down to the police station and help that nigga like, you will be an accomplice to obstruction of justice. Niggas get in trouble all the time for this. You interfering with an active police investigation, Trish!"

Thinking more and more about it, obviously, Myron was right. Shit, I knew this all along. I didn't even know why I even let Dre suck me into this shit. And then he had the audacity to seduce me with weed, Henny and sex. He knew exactly what the fuck he was doing.

"Ughh! I can't believe this. And then we ended up fucking…"

"WHAT?!?!?" Myron screamed. "Are you fucking kidding me right now?!?"

Shit. I paused for a moment, biting my lip. *Damn it, Trish! Why did you let that slip out?!?!?* I quickly thought to myself. I knew that would tick Myron the fuck off.

"Ughhh! He seduced me though! He got me high and drunk as fuck and I just gave in. It was supposed to be a part of the plan!"

"OH MY GOD! You two are the dumbest mothafuckas I know on the PLANET! Why would you two even think that shit would be a good ass idea?!? I mean, I get why Dre did it but if you needed the money, why didn't you just fucking called me?!?!? I could've just put the damn fucking apartment deposit on my credit card!"

Damn, Myron was so damn right. "Myron, I was just afraid to call and ask. I didn't want to take money on your house and your kids! And then what if Quisha would've found out?!?"

"Yeah, but still. Fuck Quisha. And fuck them kids. You already know how I feel about you. Look, enough of this shit. Quisha is out and about with the kids with her mama'nem. Meet me at Oak Brook mall in like an hour. I'll pick you up, put you in a hotel and then we'll figure out something then, okay?"

"Okay," I replied as I quickly shot up from the toilet seat with the shower still running. I could hear Dre was still taking a shower in his room, so I quickly made my way back into the guestroom, packed the small duffle bag I had with all of my shit and quickly made my way outside of his townhouse.

Although I felt kind of bad, the more I thought about it, the more I realized I needed to keep his money. Yeah, fuck him. That shit was mine now. Why? Well, I considered that shit a tax. For all the bullshit shit that nigga put me through over the years, the least thing he could do was give me two stacks to help me get back on my feet. Besides, I still couldn't fathom that this nigga would try to recruit me to help him lie to the police. Especially over a rape that I now know he probably did…This nigga thought he was so slick but I'd be damned if I was gonna be his fucking accomplice. He had me all the way fucked up.

Once I got a block away from Dre's townhouse, I took shelter at a bus stop, pulled out my phone and quickly ordered an Uber out to Oak Brook. From Hyde Park, it was gonna take me at least an hour to get out that way. Just in time to meet up with my real boo, Myron.

With $2,000 loaded on my card, I knew I didn't have to worry about money anymore. Myron was also gonna front me some cash. God was really looking out for me. Dre was the fucking devil. "Thank you, Jesus," I mumbled to myself when I saw that my Uber was now a minute away.

Some moments later, a gray Toyota Camry with a big ass Uber sign in the windshield pulled up to the bus stop. I stood up from the bench and quickly dashed in the car. Once inside, I pulled my phone out and shot Myron and text letting him know I was making my way out to Oak Brook Mall. Then I pulled up Dre's phone number and blocked him. Fuck him. That nigga was such a dirty, dumb ass, lying piece of shit. Yeah, that $2,000 was mine! And if he tried to threaten me to get it back, I was going to blackmail his ass with proof that he tried to get me to lie. And then I'd lie and tell the police he raped me. Let that fuck nigga try me and it was on.

~

About fifty minutes later, my Uber driver pulled into the vast, damn-near filled parking lot of Oak Brook Mall. It was a big ass mall all the way out in the west suburbs of Chicago. I hadn't been out here in years. Before I ended up in jail, I'd usually went shopping at River Oaks in the South Suburbs or North Riverside, which wasn't too far away from here. Oak Brook was kind of a ritzy ditzy mall. I wondered why Myron chose this place for us to meet up.

Before we hopped off the expressway, I kept wrangling back and forth whether or not I should turn around and make my way back to Dre's place. A part of me still felt so guilty for taking off like the way I did. Dre probably did have good intentions. I mean, truth be told, he didn't have to give me the money. And then he let me stay with him. Nigga didn't even really put a protest when I demanded two stacks. Either he was super-guilty for raping that white girl and he couldn't just be real with me and tell me or…he was kind of low-key looking out for me.

But see, I knew niggas like Dre. That nigga was a fraud at the end of the day. All of his shit was a front. Yeah, he may have had a good ass job. A car. A nice ass townhouse. He had a lot going for him, but that nigga was a liar and a dog. Yeah, I made my fair share of mistakes. I definitely wasn't no saint. But Dre? That nigga fucked my best friend AND my sister. What kind of nigga does that? A bum ass, dirty ass, fuck ass clown! That's who! The more I thought about it, the more I realized all along I was being played. As much Dre presented himself as a nice guy, at the end of the day, he was a straight-up pathological liar and a sociopath. That nigga used any and everyone to get his way. Hell, he was even using my daughter to get back at me. The one thing that I couldn't stand the most about him, too, was his mama. That baldheaded bitch always defended her son at every step she could. Bitch never got my side of the story on shit. She always stuck up for him, even when she knew he was dead wrong with all the fucked up things he put me through.

Anyways…

With all of these thoughts about Dre running through my head, I had to send him one last text just to let him know how I really felt. "Nigga you got me all the way fucked up if you think I'm gonna lie 4 u. Thank you for the dick though. And don't even try to get your money back from CashApp. Fuck with me and I'll fuck with you. I'll run down to the police and tell them everything that happened. And we still goin' to court, pussy nigga," is what I wrote to his bitch ass. That'll put the fear of God in his weak ass.

"Which department store are you going to, ma'am?" my Uber driver asked me. Damn, this dude kind of reminded me of Olu. These African niggas were sexy as fuck, I swear!

"Oh, you can drop me off at the front of Macy's," I replied as the driver got deeper into the parking lot. Within a few minutes, we were at the front entrance of Macy's. "Thank you, sir. Have a good day," I said with a big smile as I hopped out of the car and dashed into Macy's.

I quickly pulled out my phone and shot Myron a text. A minute later, he started calling me. "Hey, baby! I'm here!" I said.

"Bitch! Who the fuck are you?!?!?"

My eyes exploded open. This was Quisha. *FUCK!*

"Umm…This is Myron's friend…"

"Wait. This voice sound real familiar," she said.

"Bruh, just give me my phone back!" I heard Myron scream in the background.

Not wanting to get any deeper into what the fuck Myron and Quisha had going on, I quickly hung up. My phone kept vibrating though. Myron, or probably Quisha, was calling me back. I wasn't going to answer.

Standing in the middle of the first level of the store, I closed my eyes and shook my head. This plan was already turning out to be a fucking nightmare. I didn't even know why I let Myron convince me to meet up with him! Ughh! Never again will I fuck with a nigga who already had a bitch.

"I should've known this shit was gonna happen! UGHH!" I groaned to myself, shaking my head. "Fuck it."

My stomach started to grumble. I wanted to get something to eat. Some moments later, I ended up in the food court and was debating what I wanted to grab to eat before I'd head back to the city. I hadn't called Neicy yet to let her know what my plans were gonna be but once I found something to eat, I was gonna give her a ring and tell her I left Hope early. Then again, I grew kind of curious why she hadn't called me all this morning. It was damn near one PM now you would've thought she would've called to check up on me by now. Hrrrrm…I wondered if Dre texted her.

Anyways, scanning my options in the food court, I decided I wanted to get some Sbarro's. I loved their pizza, especially their meatballs. So, after I ordered and ate two slices, some garlic knots and a side of meatballs, I ordered an Uber and headed back to the city. What a fucking waste of thirty dollars though. Shit, I was gonna text Myron and tell him he needed to reimburse me for making a waste of a trip. He was a clown ass nigga, too, truth be told. Nigga couldn't even get a handle over that fat ass Quisha bitch. Gosh, she was so fat, nasty and disgusting. I mean, I knew I didn't look my best at the moment, but damn, that bitch was just so sloppy. I didn't understand why Myron was letting that bitch have so much control over him.

Once I got back onto the South Side, I called Neicy and told her I was on my way. She told me she had been meaning to call me, but she got caught up with her job and didn't have time to hit me up to see how I was doing. She told me she'd be home in about an hour, so I would've needed to waste some time elsewhere before she got back.

So, with about a good thirty minutes to spare, I had to the Uber driver drop me off at the Beauty Mart, which was right around the

corner of Neicy's crib. Once he pulled up to the entrance of the store, I hopped out and walked inside. Shit, I hadn't been here in a long ass time. Before getting locked up, I was in this place at least three times a week buying all types of shit.

The wigs I currently had were starting to look a damn mess, and now that I had me some extra coins to spare, thanks to Dre's wack ass, I was gonna buy me a bomb ass lacefront. I could probably get someone to put in on the low. I wondered if my chick, Janyla, was still doing hair. She lived right around the corner from Neicy and she'd only charge me $30 to do my shit.

I walked in the store and was immediately greeted by this older Asian lady. "Good afta-nun," she said in her thick accent.

"Hey, how ya'll doin'?" I replied with a little fake smile.

She didn't respond as I kept walking down the first aisle where all the lacefronts were at. Now that I was about to get back onto my bad bitch shit, my eyes quickly flew to this fly ass, body wavy Brazilian Remy. My real hair was starting to grow back, thanks to this tea tree oil and vitamin e pills I was taking, so there should've been no problems with getting this shit stitched into my head. I looked at the price tag and my mouth dropped. It was on sale for $100! Usually, a 24-inch lacefront went for $400 at the minimum! I grabbed the package and then made my way back up to the front counter. No one was virtually in the store other than some other lady and her kids.

"Excuse me, ma'am. I wanna go ahead and get this."

"Okay. No problem," she said as she snatched the hair out of my hand and rung it up. "Three-huned and ninety-five dolla you pay," she said.

"Excuse me? How much?"

"Three-huned and ninety-five dolla…"

Suddenly I scrunched my face and said, "But the price back on the rack said $100. Why you charging me $400 all of a sudden?"

"Look, that was special we had last week. Now the price is three-huned and ninety-five dolla. You not want, you go somewhere else. We don't want no problem."

"Well, damn, I don't want problems either, but that's false advertising. If the price changed, ya'll should've changed it back."

"Okay, you just leave ma'am. Leave the store."

Confused, I stood there wondering why all of a sudden this lady was getting flip with me. When I used to come here years ago, the owner, some older man who used to work the counter was so nice to me. I wondered what happened to him. But this bitch right here! Her little nasty ass attitude was starting to bring out the worse in me. I almost had to contain myself from cursing her the fuck out but I'd be damned if she was gonna stand here and belittle me. All because I

simply asked a question.

"Ma'am, you don't have to get rude. I just wanted to know why the sudden price difference, but if that's how you feel, I can gladly go and spend my money elsewhere."

"Okay, fine! You want for one-hunned dolla! You have! Just buy and leave!"

"Okay, well, damn!" I replied as I pulled out my wallet and handed her my CashApp debit card. The bitch may have been rude but I wasn't gonna walk away without that weave. She snatched the card out of my hand and then ran it through her credit card machine. That shit right there just made me even more upset but I had to keep telling myself to calm down and that this shit would be over in a few seconds once I got my shit.

"It no go through…"

"What do you mean it didn't go through?"

"IT NO HAVE MONEY! Credit card declined!"

"Naw! You need to run that card again, baby. And you need to lower your voice."

"Okay! You no have money, you need to leave now! Get out!"

Suddenly I flipped out. "Bitch! I don't know who the fuck you talkin' to like that but I will come across that damn counter and choke the fuck out of you, lil hoe! Watch who the fuck you talkin' to, bitch! You up in our neighborhoods selling yo cheap ass shit and trying to price gouge. I should report you mothafuckas!"

"MA'AM! YOU LEAVE NOW! GET OUT!" I heard a male Asian voice from behind me. I turned around, a man, looking no older than fifty was standing there with a wooden baseball bat in his hand. "What you gon do with that? Beat me to death?!?!" I said as I scanned him up down, determined not to go anywhere. I'd be damned if these Chinese muhfuckas were gonna stand there and openly disrespect me.

"Sista girl, it ain't worth it. Just leave," one of the customers, an older black lady, said as she made her way out the door.

"Naw! Fuck that! And mind ya business, bitch!"

"Goodbye!" she said rolling her eyes, making her way out the door.

"I ain't going nowhere until you run my card one more time! I know I got money on it!" I protested but my gut feeling was telling me perhaps Dre quickly contacted his bank and got his money back. If he did that shit, I was definitely running my ass down to the police station to snitch on his stupid ass. Nigga better not fucked me over!

"I'm callin' the muhfuckin' police! Ya'll wrong as fuck!" I said as I grabbed my phone out of my purse. I glanced down and saw Dre sent me a text message.

"Trish…I was really rooting for you but I see you still on the same fuckery. I contacted my bank and quickly got my money back. And

FYI, the police called and said that they are dropping the investigation. The white girl lied. FYI – if you think you're gonna get custody or visitation rights over Ariyanna, think again. I'm already lawyered the fuck up. See you in court. Good luck with everything."

My eyes widened with rage, I was ready to explode. "FUCK!" I screamed, stomping my feet on the floor. Suddenly, pain from my hip shot up to my back. "AHHH!"

"LEAVE MY STORE!" the man yelled as he raised the bat at me.

"Man, fuck you!" I glanced over at the lacenfront sitting on the counter, grabbed it and then tried to dash out the store.

"COME BACK HERE!" the man yelled as he chased after me. But with my hip hurting, I couldn't get that far. Suddenly, the Chinese man ran up behind me, got the bat around my neck and started choking me out.

"GET. OFF. ME!" I cried in midst of choking, trying to pull the back off my neck. But the man just squeezed tighter until we both fell to the floor. Kicking and screaming, I was struggling to breathe as I tried to fight this dude off me.

"YOU STEAL! CALL THE COPS! SHE STEAL!" the man cried.

"YO! GET OFF HER! YOU HURTING HER!" I heard another customer inside the store scream. "HE'S GONNA KILL HER!"

"SHE STEAL! SHE THIEF! SHE NO PAY!" the Chinese woman screamed.

But as the man continued to squeeze the bat around my neck, I could feel my body weaken and my lungs began to squeeze tight, running out of air.

"YOU NO PAY!" the man screamed.

Fighting for my life, I just knew I was gonna die. I still tried to kick and scream, but all of my energy began to quickly dither away. This is it. This is it! You're gonna die! Then I felt my eyes close and all I could see was the depth of eternal darkness.

Epilogue

Two years later…

"HAPPY BIRTHDAY TO YOU! Happy birthday to you! Happy birthday, dear Shawn! Happy Birthday to you!"

Cheerfully singing out hearts out, a bunch of us were circled around my one-year-old son, Shawn. Sitting in his high chair, he had his big doe eyes glued to the cake in front of him. He didn't give a damn about anything other than that cake obviously.

"Daddy! Look! Shawn is about to stuff his hand in the cake," Junior yelled as he pointed at Shawn. "Leave him alone, Junior. He's hungry!" Ariyanna chimed in.

It was about thirty of us gathered at this clubhouse at the Kenwood Park District, not too far away from my townhouse. Mama and some of her friends, my kids, friends and family members were watching Shawn dive his tiny hand into the small cake in front of him.

You might be wondering who in the hell I got pregnant this time. Well, Shelly and I fell in love with one another. Shit happened pretty quickly, too. Weeks after we started "co-parenting", one thing led to another and she and I were glued to each other. Next thing you, she was pregnant once again. But this time it wasn't an accident. We had this planned. We wanted to have a bigger family.

As crazy as it may sound, Shelly was truly God-sent. Without her, I would've never made so many remarkable changes in my life. She really forced me to look in the mirror and recognize that I had a lot to learn about women. Granted, she made some crazy ass mistakes herself, which she gladly recognized, but she made me become a better man. She pushed me to finish undergrad and eventually coached me into how to prepare for the LSAT and get into law school. And because of her, I was now in my first year of law school at DePaul. Although I was missing my cousin, Tanisha, every day, I was forever thankful that I was listed as a beneficiary on her life insurance policies. Without that unexpected cash, I didn't even know how I was going to pay for law school. And speaking of Tanisha, it was truly tragic that a year after she got killed by the police, lo and mothafuckin' behold, Candreka's trifling ass did indeed get pregnant by some nigga. And that nigga ended up being a big-time credit card finesser that she was doing dirt with. The two of them got caught up in some shit and up in federal prison for bank fraud. Now her ass was locked up for a decade. I felt so sorry for her kid but that shit was kind of karma for fucking around on cousin.

Oh, and speaking of karma…As I looked at Ariyanna, I kept

thinking about Trish. It was so fucked up what happened to her. So fucked up, I didn't even want to think about that shit at the moment. All I knew was that I was thankful that her true intentions came out that day. She showed me that no matter how much you try to help someone, sometimes they have it in them to fuck you over. Granted, I was still wrong for putting her in a bind to help me to potentially lie to the police. However, it was obvious she still had so much resentment for me that she was willing to forgo the possibility of us starting fresh and being good friends and co-parents for our daughter.

Oh well. Life moves on…

I glanced over at Shelly as she stood to my right and said, "Damn, Shawn finne tear that whole cake up!"

"Yeah, I know. He's gonna get diabetes!" she laughed.

I leaned in and planted a kiss on her cheek. "I love you," I said in her ear. "You mean so much to me."

"I love you, too, bae," she replied.

Some moments later after we watched and laughed at Shawn devour his cake, Shelly threw her glance toward the other kids surrounding us. "Okay, kiddies! Do you all wanna go see the magician?"

"YESSS!" the crowd of kids cheered.

"Okay, follow me!" Shelly replied as she led about ten kids over to another part of the clubhouse where a magician was about to put on a show for them.

Mama, a few feet away from us, was talking to one of her friends. I walked over and she looked at me with a grin. "My grandson gon be kind of chubby, I see," she laughed.

"Hahaha, we'll see. I don't know where he got that sweet tooth from 'cuz I don't even like cake like that," I replied.

"You did when you were around that age," Mama said.

"For real? You lying," I grinned back.

"Nah, I ain't. Anyways, Dre, I need to talk to you for a sec," Mama said.

"Damn, I was just about to say I wanted to talk to you as well."

"What about?"

"Just follow me," I said as I gently grabbed her by the wrist and led her over to a corner of the clubhouse where we could have some privacy.

"What's going on, Dre?"

I took a deep breath and then exhaled. "Well, I know I kind of put the cart before the horse. But I'm ready…"

"Ready for what?"

"Marriage. I'm about to propose to Shelly."

Mama suddenly clasped her mouth with her hands, her gaze

widened with surprise.

"I know, mama," I said as I began to grow nervous as fuck. My core filled with anxiety. Yeah, I was ready to do this. I had to. Shelly meant so much to me now. Now that we had another child together and we were now living together, it was time to make that move. Truth be told, I should've did this a long time ago, but I wanted to make sure her and I both were in the right space and state of mind. I was ready to spend the rest of my life with her. I pulled out the black ring box from my back pocket, opened it up and showed Mama the big ass diamond ring I bought for bae.

"Dre…I'm so happy for you!" Mama exclaimed as she glanced down at the ring. A tear trickled out of her right eye. "I'm so proud, son! Oh My God! But…Damn…Fuck!"

"What?" I was somewhat confused by her last statement.

"Dre…I should've told you this but I felt soooo bad…I…"

"You what?"

"I invited Trish to the party."

Suddenly my eyes exploded with anger. "Mama! What the fuck?!?" I growled, but low enough so no one else could hear us. Obviously, I didn't want to make a scene. And I definitely didn't want Shelly to see the ring in my hand.

"Why wouldn't you tell me that?!?!?"

"I know, Dre, but listen."

"Mama, this is the same shit you pulled last time! Like, what the hell?!?!?"

Mama closed her eyes and exhaled. "Dre, just listen to me. I know she made a lot of bad mistakes. I mean, really bad mistakes. But she came to my church last weekend and I felt so bad for her. She is so tore up now. When was the last time you even saw her?"

"Shit, the last time I saw her was when she was tried to walk away with my money. Luckily, I quickly called my bank and got my shit back!"

"Damn…Okay…Well, she really ain't doing too well, Dre."

"She said that shit the last time! Now the bitch is healed from cancer. What the fuck she got now? Kidney failure?"

"Damn, how did you know?"

I huffed and rolled my eyes. "Mama, I didn't know. But damn. I can't keep doing this back and forth with Trish. Ariyanna doesn't even know who that woman is! I don't want her around my daughter….AT ALL!"

"Dre…I hear you but listen, Trish just needs a little upliftment right now. She's on dialysis. She needs a kidney transplant. She's already had three strokes. She barely can get around. She just looks so bad now."

“Whatever, mama. Fine. But I don’t want her around Ariyanna. Period. Keep her ass at a distance. And I mean that shit. Shelly is Ariyanna’s mother now.”

“Understandable, Dre. Look, I get it. But trust me, son. When you see Trish, you are gonna be in a world of surprise. It’s gonna make you really think about some shit. Trust me…”

“Well…Whatever. I guess…”

“I’m so proud of you though, Dre. And hey, think of it this way. When Trish comes and sees that you’re now engaged and about to get married, think of it as karma giving her a glimpse of what could’ve been possible between you two,” Mama said. “Anyways, when are you planning on popping the question?”

“After the magician’s show,” I replied nonchalantly.

“Okay, cool. Well, I’ll get out of your way now,” Mama said. “Thank you for everything, Dre.” Mama leaned in and gave me a tight hug. “I love you,” she mumbled and then walked off.

Although seconds earlier I was fuming with rage, I was now even angrier given that at any moment Trish was going to bumble her ass in here. If that woman tried as much to even give eye contact to my daughter, I swear I was going to let go and go crazy.

Fuck Trish. Yeah, I knew I was an asshole for thinking that but she deserved everything that happened to her. She was the byproduct of her own fucked up decisions. That bitch was a straight-up loser. So, yeah, fuck her.

~

“Alright, this is it! You ready?” the PACE bus driver glanced back in his rearview mirror and asked me.

“Yeah, I’m read,” I replied in a mumble. My eyes hazy, I was staring out of the window of the van, ready for the driver to help me out. Since I was now virtually confined to a wheelchair, any time I had to get around the city, I had to have the assistance of a PACE paratransit van.

My life drastically changed that day I tried to run out of that hair store. I swore I thought I was gonna die but God spared my life. Unfortunately, due to the brain damage I suffered from being almost choked to death, half my body was paralyzed. I also suffered extensive kidney damage which led to me having three strokes back to back some months after the altercation.

Although the owners of that hair store were arrested and the store was forced to close down, I didn’t escape punishment. Once I was released from the hospital, I was required to spend another six months in jail for violating my probation. Once I got out, ironically, I found

myself right back at Hope with Pastor Shirley. At that point, I had no other choice. Monique and I definitely weren't friends anymore. Neicy was done with me. Myron eventually got married to Quisha and then they moved to North Carolina.

I lost everything. Every single thing. And all because I was impulsive and made one bad, impulsive decision. Luckily, the only thing I didn't lose was my church and the forgiveness of Pastor Shirley. Although her and I had it out that night, she still saw beyond my flaws and allowed me to come back to Hope, no questions asked. I guess she felt so bad for me when she saw my physical condition.

Don't get it twisted though. Now that I was back living at Hope, Pastor Shirley had some serious demands I had to fulfill if I stayed there and worked for her. And one of those demands was that I had to do twenty hours of community service a week. Ironically, that was how I ended up reconnecting with Dre's mama. She saw me at a food bank drive her church was hosting. At first, I didn't think she was going to speak to me when she saw me but she eventually made her way over and we talked. She told me all about Dre, his children, his new girlfriend and how he was now in law school. A part of me wanted to get so mad at her but then I had to check myself and realize Dre was doing him. He was living his life to the best of his abilities, pushing forward with his goals. I, on the other hand, was living out the consequences of my reckless and ratchet behavior. Just as much Dre deserved all the blessings he had coming in his life, I deserved all the hell coming my way.

Once the bus driver wheeled me off the lift of the van, I pulled out my phone and sent Dre's mama a text message letting her know I was at the entrance of the clubhouse. Some moments later, she sauntered outside and then approached me. "Hey, Trish. I'm glad you can make it."

"Hey, Ms. Williams. Thank you for inviting me," I mumbled. Because of the strokes, my speech was very jumbled.

"Well, let me go ahead and help you in," she said as she walked behind me and began to push my wheelchair. "Thank you," I replied.

We made it inside the foyer and just before we were about to enter through the double doors of the main room of the clubhouse, Dre's mama stopped and looked down at me. "So, I did tell Dre I invited you."

"Okay," I responded.

"So, just to let you know, he's not too thrilled that I invited you but he's okay with it."

"Okay," I replied. "Can..Can I tal—"

"No. Don't even think about it. Dre doesn't want you around Ariyanna. I'm sorry it had to be this way but Dre is very serious. And

he means it."

I lowered my head, almost ready to cry. I couldn't even see my own damn child. Hell, I didn't even know what was the exact purpose of me even coming.

"I un-understand," I stuttered. "One day, I hope."

Ms. Williams pursed her lips and didn't respond. "Well, let's go inside. I'mma just wheel you over near the food and you can fix you a plate. We got some ribs, hot dogs, hamburgers, 'tata salad and chips."

"Okay," I responded.

Ms. Williams rolled me in and before we could make it to the food table, Dre ran into us. We all froze out of fear and shock. Well, I froze out of fear. Dre probably was shocked. Shocked that I looked wretched. I had on a hand-me-down purple polka dot dress I got donated to me from the Salvation Army. A blonde wig crookedly adorned the top of my head. This morning when I got ready, I tried my best to adjust the wig, but to no avail, I ended up looking like ET when he was wearing that wig.

"Hey, Trish," Dre muttered.

"Hey, Dre," I replied.

The two of us just kept looking at each other until Dre leaned down and said, "Don't talk to Ariyanna at all or I will ask that you leave. Understand?"

"Okay," I replied. "I ju-just nee-ne-needed to get out of the house," I replied. Fighting back tears, I glanced away and then said to Ms. Williams, "I guess I'mma fix me a hot dog."

"Okay," she replied as she rolled me away. Dre walked off.

After Ms. Williams helped me fix a plate for myself, she rolled me over to a corner by myself. "I'll be back in a few to check up on you," she said. "Okay," I replied. I then glanced down at my plate and began to break apart the hot dog. I slowly lifted my hand and put a piece of it in my mouth. I had to take my time since half my mouth could barely move.

As I ate, from afar, I could see Ariyanna playing with who looked like a few of her friends. She was getting so big. Wow, I felt so disgusted with myself seeing my daughter growing so fast before my very own eyes. I wasn't even there in most of her life to see her get bigger. Seeing her talk and carry on, I could see bits and pieces of myself in her. Eventually, she along with the group of friends trekked closer to me.

"I wanna get something to drink," one of the little girls said. She looked no older than six and had a head full of red hair. As Ariyanna got closer and closer, a part of me was so tempted to call her over and talk to her but I knew if I did, I would be kicked out. So, I kept my calm and kept my gaze latched onto baby girl.

"Who is that over there?" I heard one of the girls say as she looked over at me.

Ariyanna looked over and froze for a second. Oh My God. Oh My God. She was recognizing me. Did she know it was me? I wondered to myself. Damn near shaking in my wheelchair, anxiety bubbled within me. I didn't know what I was going to say or do if she managed to come over and talk to me.

"I don't know. She looks so old. Probably someone's granny," Ariyanna said. "And she has that ugly wig on."

"HAHAHAHAH!" All the girls exploded into laughter as they grabbed sodas out of a cooler and ran back over to another side of the room.

Suddenly I wanted to break down and cry. Someone's granny. Damn, I was so unrecognizable to the point where truth be told, at times I didn't even recognize myself. What was I even doing here? What was the point? This was torture, I kept thinking to myself. I had enough at this point. I was thankful Ms. Williams felt sorry for me and invited me over but this was too much. My own damn daughter thought I was someone's old ass grandmother.

Just before I was about to put my plate down and quietly attempt to roll myself away so I could leave, I saw Dre walk up to the DJ at the far end of the room. He grabbed a microphone. "Attention everyone, I have a very important announcement to make. Shelly, can you come up here with me. Ariyanna and Junior, you come here as well," Dre said. "It's very important."

The chatter coming from adults inside the room came to a halt. Parents instructed their children to quiet down and come huddle next to them. I still remained off in the corner, watching everything from afar. Dre's mama told me about Shelly but this was the first time I'd seen her upfront and in person. Well, not necessarily upfront since I was several feet away by myself, feeling like a complete stranger.

Shelly was holding who I presumed was Dre's one-year-old son, Shawn. She walked up next to Dre. Ariyanna and Dre's other son followed suit. Dre then looked at Shelly and said, "Look at my big family. This is amazing. Who would've thought this would be my life a year ago."

Suddenly everyone in the room began laughing. Seeing that a few of Dre's homeboys (except Myron) was here, I guess they laughed because they knew Dre had a past.

"Anyways, first, I'd like to thank everyone for coming out this afternoon for Shawn's birthday party. Although some people think birthday parties for one-year-olds are pointless, this is also another opportunity I wanted to have to celebrate an important milestone in my life and in Shelly's life." Dre then turned to Shelly and said,

“Shelly…You know we started our situation a bit rough. You came out of nowhere unexpectedly and I didn’t know what to think of it. But, as time went on, you proved to me that I was capable of being a better man. And for that, I’m forever thankful. And Ariyanna is thankful, too!”

All of a sudden, I could see Dre pull out from his back black box. He got down to one knee and the entire room filled with unexpected gasps. He opened the box and even from several feet away I could see the glimmering of the diamond ring.

Shelly, caught off by surprise, clasped her mouth with one hand as she held Shawn with the other.

“GO ‘HEAD, BOY! DO YOUR THANG!” someone from the crowd of parents shouted.

“Shelly, I love you with all of my heart. I want to be with you for the rest of my life. Will you marry me?”

“YES! YES, I WILL!” Shelly cried as Dre rose and then slipped the engagement ring onto Shelly’s hand.

I couldn’t take it anymore. I had to leave. I felt like this was all one big set-up. Ms. Williams knew good and goddamn well what she was doing by inviting me out here and I felt punked! That bitch knew Dre was gonna propose to this bitch and that was why she invited me out here!

Suddenly, I mustered up so much energy, I wanted to stand up and scream and curse everyone the fuck out. But when I tried to stand up, my right leg just simply couldn’t move. It was like I was fighting against gravity. A tear streamed down my face. Fuck it. Using what energy I had, I just looked away and rolled away and out into the hallway of the clubhouse. I was so enraged and nervous, I had to use the bathroom but I had absolutely no idea where it was. So, I just shitted and peed on myself. Luckily, I was wearing some depends. Thank God I had an extra diaper in my purse.

Once I managed to find the women’s bathroom, which was all the way down the hallway, I strolled inside and instantly released tears. I rolled into the handicap stall and just sat inside there for twenty minutes, crying my heart out. That could’ve been me getting proposed to. I could’ve been Shelly. But I messed up my life. Now look at me. A loser.

A minute later, I heard the bathroom door fly open and then few women stumble inside. I instantly grew quiet since I didn’t want anyone to know I had been in here crying my heart out.

“EWW! It smells like shit, ass, piss and fish up in here! What in the FUCK?!?! Good GAWHDT!” one of the women growled. “Anyways, girl. You saw the bitch that was all the way in the corner in the wheelchair?”

“Yeah, girl! Who was that?!? I was so confused on who that was? Who was that, someone’s grandma?”

“Naw! Girl, that was Dre’s first baby mama! You don’t remember that LaTrisha hoe?”

“WHAT!?!?!? Hoe, I know you fuckin’ lyin’! Why she looked like that?!? And why the fuck was she even here? Girl, that bitch looked a hot ass mess! What happened to her?”

“CHILE! Where the fuck do I even begin?!?”

THE END

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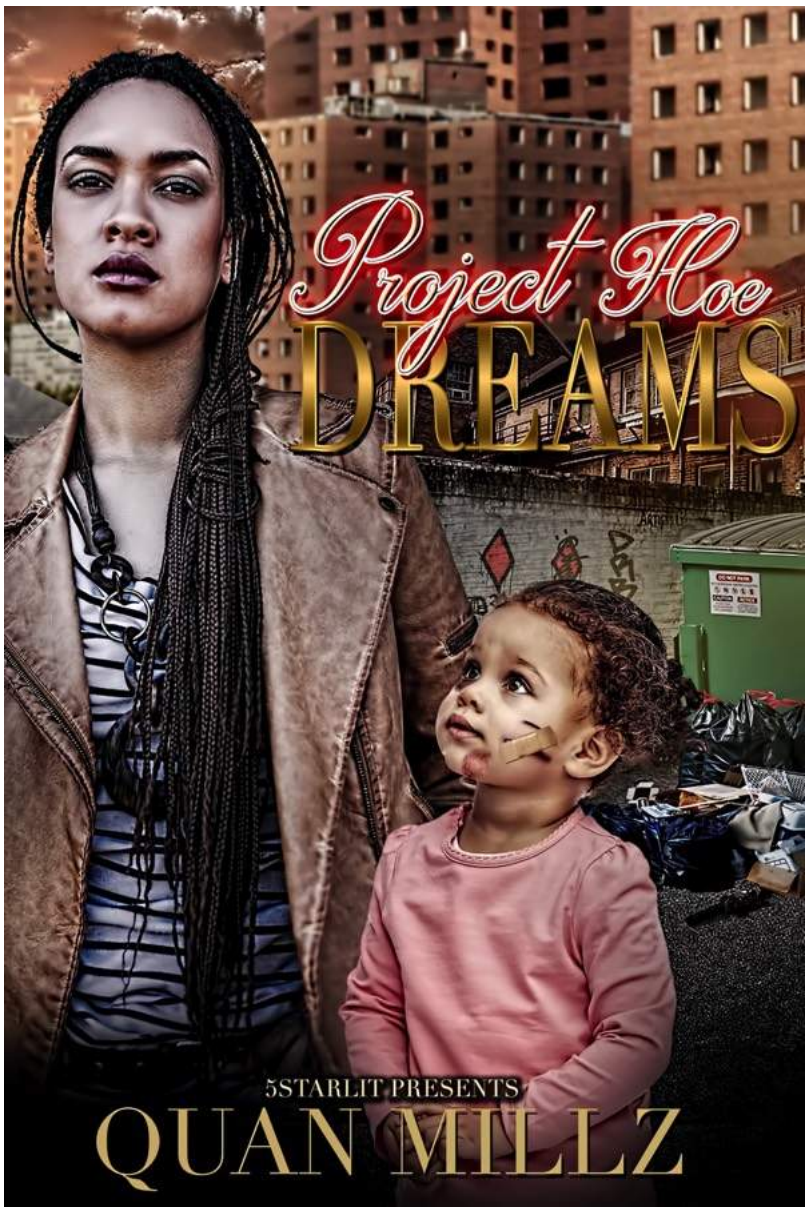

Chapter One

"**DAMNNN! HURRY UP BITCH, I TOLD YO DUMB ASS THE SOCIAL WORKER LADY FINNE BE HERE ANY SECOND NOW, GOD DAMN! WHAT THE FUCK IS YOU DOIN'?!?!"** Darnisha barked at Tasia, her eldest "daughter".

Looking very fucking annoyed, Darnisha ran up on her daughter, grabbed her arm and began shaking her, "Gosh! You so damn fat and slow! You movin' like a fuckin' big ass whale. Bitch, we ain't at the Aquarium! And you need to really lose some of that god damn weight! Ole greasy black fat ass!"

The angry, vicious ass thirty-year-old mama anxiously paced back and forth in her apartment, puffing on a fresh Newport, cruelly observing Tasia clean up the living room. Her two other children, Jazmine and Jashaun, were in the kitchen, doing their best in the quickest manner to tidy up. The kitchen needed to be perfect and presentable to the social worker due to show up any second now.

Darnisha knew Mrs. Watkins, the senior case manager from the City of Chicago's Department of Children and Family Services, had a notorious reputation for being a hard, no bullshit tolerating stern ass bitch quick to deny a benefits application over the smallest shit. In fact, when Darnisha told Shatoya, one of her long-time besties, that Mrs. Watkins was going to be doing a home visit early this Saturday morning, she recounted to Darnisha her horrible fucked up experiences with the case worker. She gave Darnisha a two hour lecture, warning her not to fuck around with the old strict bitch. "Girl! Make sure yo shit smell like Pinesol and Febreeze 'cuz dat ole lady do not play! That bitch used to stay denyin' my EBT and WIC until my shit was spotless."

Taking heed to Shatoya's warning, Darnisha was on it this morning to make sure everything was in order. She wanted her shit to be spotless, and if her children couldn't get it together this morning, she was going to fuck them up big time.

"Jasmine and Jashaun, ya'll almost done in there?" Darnisha roared as she temporarily turned her laser-focused attention away from Tasia and onto her kids in the kitchen.

“Yesss,” the younger siblings responded in unison.

As they diligently worked, their juvenile conversations mixed in with the distant sound of piping hot running sink water splashing against clinking plates and silverware. The teenage chatter combined with the clinking made for an orchestra of annoyance, echoing throughout the hazy apartment, ringing in Darnisha’s ears. Jasmine and Jashaun, both 14, were fraternal twins. Jashaun born a minute and two seconds after Jasmine.

Darnisha was very anxious to speed everything up. “Aye! Ya’ll come on in here then and let ya fat ass cousin finish in there,” Darnisha commanded to her children in the kitchen. She then swiftly turned her attention to Tasia, “Move yo ass. I need to make sure my REAL kids look on point. When you get done, change out of that shit and put on somethin’ decent. Don’t nobody wanna see yo black ass in that shit. C’mon now! Hurry up!”

“Ok-kk-kk…” Tasia stuttered as she turned off the small maroon dirt devil vacuum and stood it up against a brown cotton sofa in the living room.

“BITCH! Don’t put that dirty shit on my couch! Fuck wrong wit you?!? Dumb ass!” Darnisha without hesitation punched and slapped her niece and then shoved her out of the living room. Tasia didn’t respond. Shit, she wouldn’t respond. She knew if she did, her aunt would go even crazier with her ass whooping. The poor girl just lowered her head and swiftly jiggled her way towards the kitchen to finish where her cousins left off .

“Hahahah! Dumb fat bitch” Jasmine and Jashaun laughed and mocked Tasia as they passed her and made their way into the living room.

Tasia, who just turned 14 not too long ago, was not Darnisha’s daughter. That shit should be obvious now because what mother would say such outrageous and outlandish foul shit to their own daughter? Tasia in actuality was Darnisha’s niece. The story goes that Latasha, Tasia’s mother, and Darnisha’s oldest sister, was kidnapped, brutally raped, and murdered by a serial killer who targeted prostitutes and escorts who sold themselves on Craig’s List, Backpages and other shady online dating sites.

After the brutal murder of her sister, Darnisha was super reluctant to take her niece in given she already had two rowdy, horny teens of her own to rear, but when she quickly learned she’d be getting a huge ass $1400 check from the state and feds each month to take care of her niece, she jumped her trifling ratchet ass on the opportunity.

It was crazy ‘cuz truth be told, Latasha and Darnisha never got along with each other. From birth, both girls always had an intense rivalry. Most of their tiffs and spats usually were over petty bullshit.

But when Darnisha found out her long-time boyfriend, Donterio, was secretly fucking Latasha and ended up getting pregnant with Tasia, all hell broke loose. The sisters' already dysfunctional relationship went to shit and they stopped talking to each other completely.

Darnisha was so enraged by her sister's actions, she didn't even go to her funeral. However, you'd think now that her sister was gone, Darnisha would want to forge some sort of positive relationship with her niece, but she honestly didn't give a fuck about having one. She just saw her niece as an easy way to rake in some extra coins every month.

Once Tasia got done loading the tiny apartment's cheap dishwasher, she quickly wiped down the counters, making sure not a single fucking crumb was visible. She knew she'd better do an excellent job too 'cuz if not, Darnisha was gonna go across her badly-in-need-of-a- perm head.

Darnisha and her two kids were in the living room idly watching TV, waiting for Mrs. Watkins to show up at any moment now. As Darnisha sat on the couch, rapidly tapping her foot on the freshly vacuumed carpeted floor, she anxiously puffed on her half-smoked Newport. Crazy enough, she knew she shouldn't be smoking either because she just found out a few weeks back she was expecting a third child…from someone unknown.

She scratched her satin bonnet cap covered head, trying to prepare herself for a myriad of prying questions she knew Mrs. Watkins was going to possibly ask her. She just kept thinking of Shatoya's advice, over and over again.

"Tasia! Is you done yet?" the angry aunt growled.

"Ye-ye-yees m-m-mmmm-ma'am." Tasia lowly responded in her typical semi-depressed stutter.

"Ok, then, go hurry up and change. Shit! And god damn, can you stop stuttering?!? I don't want this old bitch thinkin' you straight up retarded!"

"Ok." Tasia luckily murmured without stuttering. She quickly exited the kitchen and made her way to her bedroom. Once inside, she changed out of her pajamas, threw on a hole-filled, partly ripped, unwashed "Johnson Family Reunion" t-shirt, her black gym class shorts and a pair of flip flops. Truth be told, she really didn't have anything decent to put on since Darnisha didn't buy her new clothes. Other than her school uniform and some tight fitting church dresses, Tasia didn't have shit other than a drawer filled with ragged, faded t-shirts, shorts and one pair of sweat pants.

After making her way back out of the bedroom, down the hallway, and back to the living room, she sat down on a love seat across from her so-called family as all of them watched music videos on BET until

Mrs. Watkins' arrival.

10 minutes later…

KNOCK! KNOCK! KNOCK!

The entire family jumped at the sound of the pronounced knocks on the apartment front door. Tasia looked at her aunt with widened anxious eyes, apprehensive to say something, let alone make an unsanctioned move.

"GET DA DAMN DOOR BITCH!" With her vicious crazy eyes suddenly widened, Aunt Darnisha lowly bellowed at Tasia as she tried to quickly get her and her kids together and situated. Tasia got out of her seat and strolled to the door.

"Wait, wait, wait!" Darnisha whispered, trying her best to stop Tasia from opening the door just yet. Tasia abruptly stopped and looked at her aunt. "Hold on! Don't open da do yet!" Darnisha lowly barked as she snatched her bonnet off her head, ran her long acrylic fingernails through her blonde microbraids, doing her best to snap into the "sexy thick yellow bitch" she knew she was. Once she figured she got her hair straight, she grabbed a bottle of Febreeze off the coffee table in front of her and sprayed away, looking to kill off the smell of Newports. "Ok, go open it now!"

KNOCK! KNOCK! KNOCK!

"Hurry up!" Auntie barked as Tasia quickly dashed to the door, unlocked it and opened it.

With the door open, Tasia stood there and didn't say a word. The woman on the other side looked Tasia up and down, "Good Morning! I'm Mrs. Watkins with the Department of Children and Family Services. I'm here for an 8:30 visit with Ms. Darnisha Johnson. Is she here?" the slender, brown skinned lady dressed in a navy blue pants suit politely asked. She looked about a solid sixty years old, had her all-white silky hair pulled back into a bun and had a leather bag dangling from her small shoulders.

"Ye-yes." Tasia quietly mumbled as she let Mrs. Watkins in and escorted her to the living room.

"Good Mornin', Mrs. Watkins. I'm Darnisha. How you doin'?" Auntie stood up from the couch, adjusted her shirt and walked over to shake Mrs. Watkin's hand.

"I'm wonderful! How about yourself? And your children? It's nice out!" Mrs. Watkins replied and smiled as she looked around the dimly lit apartment.

Darnisha along with her children lived in the Altgeld Gardens-Murray Homes, one of the last remaining housing projects on the far southeast side of Chicago, bordering Indiana. "The Gardens" as most people in Chicago called the area was probably the most all-around fucked up area in the city.

Every fucking hood nigga problem you could think of was found in abundance in the Gardens. Every gang in the city had a click out here claiming a "block". At least one to two niggas got their wigs knocked back a week. Drive bys were a daily occurrence. So much that the schools inside the project would teach kids drills on how to dodge bullets. Armies of dope boys roamed the cracked, pot-hole ridden streets and sidewalks inside the project selling every drug known to mankind. "Block 9", one of the many divisions within the Gardens, was known for being one of if not biggest hoe stroll in the Midwest. All types of nasty bitches would flock from other parts of the city just to sell pussy, ass, head and other ways to make johns bust big creamy nuts.

Despite Auntie Darnisha being a hood bitch, she didn't grow up in the Gardens. She'd only been out here for five years. Her and Latasha grew up further north in middle class Chatham and were raised by their deceased mother, Velma.

It's funny too 'cuz growing up, Darnisha never thought in a thousand years her ass would end up living in the PJs, let alone the muthafuckin' Gardens. But since she was so busy chasing big dick dope boys in high school, a series of continuous fuck ups eventually landed her ass out her in the middle of this urban desolation.

But now that she was "taking care" of Tasia, Darnisha was ready to make some moves and get the fuck out of here ASAP. Mrs. Watkins was her ticket to freedom. The stern social worker was promptly here this morning looking to interview Darnisha to see if she qualified for a special section 8 voucher allowing her to live in a high-rise in Downtown Chicago. And these high-rises in downtown were far from projects or low-income housing Darnisha was used to. These were units inside of luxury buildings where most of the residents were old rich white folk.

"Heave a seat, Mrs. Watkins! Would you like some water?" Darnisha politely asked as she motioned her two kids to get up and find somewhere else to sit.

"No thank you. I actually have my own bottle of water in my bag. But thanks anyways. I want to go ahead and get started ASAP because I have other home visits to do."

"No worries…" Darnisha responded with a smile printed across her face.

Her nerves were on fire. If she didn't get this voucher, she was going to fucking explode like the twin towers on 9-11. Getting the fuck out of Altgeld was her number one priority for so many reasons. And most of those reasons crazy enough didn't have not a damn thing to do with the welfare and betterment of her own children. It had everything to do with her own selfish, delusional "boss bitch" dreams.

Mrs. Watkins took her bag off her shoulders, whipped out a small, gray laptop as everyone else in the house had their eyes glued on her, especially Tasia. She wondered what types of questions she was about to ask her auntie, and she wanted to see how Darnisha was going to finesse her way to getting what she wanted.

"Ok, so for starters, I looked over your file and I actually have so many questions, so don't be alarmed. I like to get straight to the point and all I need you to do is just give me direct answers. No fluff, just straight answers. And don't lie. You lie on a government assistance application, that's automatic jail time. And I do refer people to the prosecutor's office for welfare fraud. Understand?"

"Yes, ma'am!" Darnisha quickly responded as she sat next to the stern social worker.

"First thing first. Why aren't you working? How are you supporting yourself if you're not bringing in verifiable, legal income? You do realize with the voucher you have to pay a certain portion out of your pocket. If you don't, you can get evicted from the building and get permanently kicked off of public housing assistance."

Fuck, fuck, fuck. Darnisha fiddled with her hands, thinking up a quick response. She figured that question would pop up, but she didn't think it would be the first to come out of Mrs. Watkins' mouth. "Well, honestly, I been on disability 'cuz of my back. I used to work at Walmart over in Pullman, but I slipped and fell, and busted my back pretty badly. I was on long-term disability for a—"

Mrs. Watkins suddenly interrupted Darnisha. "Ms. Johnson, according to your application, that was nearly six years ago. You mean to tell me your back is still badly hurt?" Mrs. Watkin's investigative eyes turned to slits and looked at Darnisha as if she knew she was full of shit.

"Well, I mean, see what had happened was when I—"

"When's the last time you went and tried to look for a job, seriously?" Mrs. Watkins interrupted her again. This bitch was on it, and Darnisha knew it. She was already fucking up.

"Ughhh, I think like a good two months ago. I just been so busy raisin' these kids, ya know."

"Ms. Johnson, there are plenty of people who have more kids than you and hold down multiple jobs…with busted backs, busted knees, diabetes, cataracts in their eyes, missing limbs. Need I go on?"

Darnisha didn't respond. She nervously smiled and nodded her head in indiscernible directions. "I mean, I can keep lookin' for a job but ain't no good payin' jobs out here."

"Ms. Johnson, if you really wanted a job you could've gone down to the unemployment office, talked to a job developer and they would've helped you out."

Darnisha remained silent. She really didn't know what to say, but all she felt were fumes of anxiety and rage boiling in the pits of her stomach.

"Ok, next question. Your two kids. Jasmine and Jashaun. I pulled their school's attendance records. They've both have had a record number of absences this year. Did you know excessive truancy is against the law and you as a parent can get fined and possibly go to jail?"

Darnisha's blood boiled like fucking lava out of a volcano in Indonesia. Shatoya didn't warn her Mrs. Watkins' questions would get THIS deep. Now she found herself having to quickly lie, rather, fluff an excuse as to why her kids missed so much school. "Well, they both was sick a lot. They both got bronchitis from all the pollution out here."

"Yeah, I bet. It smells pretty funky outside," Mrs. Watkins looked at Jasmine and Jashaun as the two off them stood off on the opposite side of the room, next to Tasia. "But I'm not buying that excuse honestly. Especially since both of them have arrest records. I only bring up their arrest records because to live in those high-rises in Downtown voucher holders need to be on their best behavior. Most of the tenants you'll be living around are professionals and they have a low tolerance for nonsense. I had to kick out a grandmother because her grandson got into a fight in one of the buildings. I'd hate for that to happen to you all."

Once again Darnisha didn't say anything back. She just slowly nodded in agreement. "I will do my best to make sure they stay out of trouble. I mean, they still is kids and they gon do stupid stuff from time to time but my children, for the most part, are good."

"Hrrrm. Ok, final question about your kids. Ms. Tasia. How are you holding up?" Now Mrs. Watkins had her attention towards the obese, dark skinned niece.

Darnisha gawked down Tasia with her unblinking devilish eyes. Tasia looked back at her. Tasia knew what that subtle scowl forming in the features her aunt's yellow face meant. Get yo story together bitch or you finne get it big time. "I-I-I-I-I'm d-do-doin' good," she stuttered, trying her best to actually not stutter and embarrass her aunt.

"That's good to hear. How's school? You on the other hand barely miss school. How is it that all three of you go to Corliss High School and yet she seems to be the only one who actually goes? Tasia, don't you kind of look after your younger cousins?"

Tasia once again looked at her aunt and then back to Mrs. Watkins "I-I-I tt-tt-try b-bb-bbut dd-dddd-dddddey ddo—"

Mrs. Watkins interrupted. "Trust me I know. No need to say more."

She then closed her laptop and packed it away in her bag. “I think I got all the information I need,” she said as she stood up and adjusted her suit and pulled the strap of the bag around her shoulders.

“That’s it?” Darnisha nervously asked as she stood up.

“Yeah…” Mrs. Watkins’ rolled her eyes, the look on her face clearly informing Darnisha yeah duh bitch, of course that’s it. “That is it.Unfortunately, I’m not approving you for the voucher.” Mrs. Watkins rolled her eyes once more and sauntered to the apartment front door.

“BUT WHY? DAT AIN’T FAIR!” Darnisha stood up and bellowed. Now this bitch mustered up a spirit of resistance, challenging Mrs. Watkins’ decision. This bitch was really on one this morning.

Mrs. Watkins quickly turned around and scrunched her face up at Darnisha’s raised tone of voice. “First of all, Ms. Johnson, lower your voice. Second of all, don’t talk to me about fair. What’s not fair is you just wanna lay up on assistance, live off the fat of the land that I and other people who work gotta pay for. A portion of my tax dollars go to you and in return you wanna try to milk the system. If you want me to be honest, my mind was made up before I came here.” she coolly responded. Damn, Shatoya was all the way right. This bitch wasn’t playing. She had a zero tolerance policy for hood booger bullshit. ZERO. ZILCH.

“’SCUSE YOU?!?” Darnisha growled as she rolled her neck and put her hands on her hips. “YOU CAN’T DO THAT! I’M REPORTIN’ YOU TO YO SUPERVISOR!”

Mrs. Watkins rolled her eyes and huffed, “Ms. Johnson. I am the supervisor. Do yourself a favor; If you want the voucher. Get a job, make sure your two kids actually stay in school and OUT of jail and stop spending Tasia’s social security check on your hair and nails. That is another form a welfare fraud. I hope you’re aware of that.”

“BITCH! FUCK YOU!” Darnisha lunged at Mrs. Watkins and tried to go for her neck. But before she could get chance to grab the lady, Jasmine and Jashaun held her back. “Mama! No! Stop! Calm down!”

Mrs. Watkins, unfazed, looked Darnisha up and down and then shook her head, pitying the woman. “Ms. Johnson…I’m trying to work with you. You got six months to get your shit together and I might, just MIGHT reconsider my decision. But for now, ya’ll have a nice Saturday morning. And Tasia, keep doing good in school.”

“GET THE FUCK OUT MY HOUSE YOU OLD EVIL BLACK BITCH! GET THE FUCK OUT! I’M CALLIN’ YO MANAGER YOU UGLAZZ OLD BITCH! WATCH AND SEE! WATCH AND FUCKIN’ SEE!” Darnisha screamed as she tried to punch and kick her away as the twins tried to restrain her.

Mrs. Watkins looked her up and down one last time and shook her head. “Oh, and by the way, I’ll be mandating you take an anger management class now as a part of your voucher application requirements. You’ll get a letter in the mail with a list of sites in the city that offer them. Enjoy the rest of your weekend.”

The unbothered social worker opened the wobbly apartment front door and then respectfully and slowly closed it as she smiled at Tasia, then strolled off into the sun onto her next home visit. It was very fucking obvious to everyone Mrs. Watkins was immune to hood bitch bullshit. The way she handled Darnisha’s ass would’ve had you thinking this old bitch was vaccinated against the volatile, savage nature of a short-fused ratchet nigga bitch like Darnisha. Shit, the lady after all probably worked with a least three generations of hood bitches and grew accustomed to seeing them pop off and explode when things didn’t go their way.

Auntie huffed, her heart pounding fast as she tried to relax and deal with the bitter pill of rejection she was forced to swallow a minute ago. She looked at Tasia, who was still sitting down. The fearful niece was anticipating her next move. Darnisha didn’t say anything though.

Suddenly she balled up her fists and quickly searched the room. Her eyes landed on a candy bowl in the center of the coffee table. She dashed towards the bowl, picked it up, and without hesitation threw the bowl right at Tasia’s face.

“AHHHHHHHHH!” Tasia cried as the bowl smacked the girl in her head, instantly gashing her forehead.

“BITCH! IT’S YO FAULT! YOU FAT BLACK BITCH! I’M GONNA KILL YOU!” Darnisha then lunged at the girl, ready to fuck her niece’s big ass up.

Chapter Two

Tasia held her face in the palms of her hands, reeling in pain, as blood gushed from the huge visible fleshy pink wound in her forehead.

"YOU FUCKED MY SHIT UP! YOU FAT BITCH! I HATE YOU!" Darnisha hovered over Tasia, punching, slapping and kicking her voiceless, defenseless poor niece as she cried and bawled an unending waterfall of tears.

"Jasmine and Jashaun! BEAT HER MOTHAFUCKIN' ASS NOW!" Darnisha without hesitation commanded her two children to pound on their cousin like she was some random nigga on the street that tried to steal money from their mother. That's the type of trifling bitch Darnisha was. Using her own damn children to do evil.

Jasmine and Jashaun loved it though. Anytime their mother gave them the opportunity to inflict rage and violence on Tasia, they did it with no regret. "YOU DUMB DONKEY ASS BITCH!" Jasmine spat as she kicked and slapped her cousin. Jashaun was on the other side, doing the same, but more viciously, striking the girl in her plump, fatty chest and arms.

As Darnisha stood back and watched her children violently strike Tasia, she was ready to move to the next round of punishment. Darnisha wanted to bring Tasia to the cusp of death, and in her ultra-violent mind, the best way to do it was to squeeze air out of her asthmatic lungs.

Darnisha quickly scoured the living room, realizing she had a lamp connected to an extension cord running to a wall socket near her television set. She lunged towards wall socket, pullet out the extension cord from the socket along with the lamp and quickly converted the cord into a makeshift noose.

"GET HER ASS ON THE FLOOR AND HOLD HER BIG ASS DOWN!" Darnisha barked at the twins, commanding them to drag Tasia off the couch and down to the ground. Doing as their mother charged, the twins used all their force to overpower through Tasia's sudden mustered up resistance and dragged her down to the floor.

As she struggled with her cousins, she painfully submitted, falling

forward onto her stomach. The twins held her arms apart as if she was about to be crucified. Darnisha dashed over, took the extension cord and noosed it around the girl's pudge dark neck, instantly cutting off her air supply.

"YOU FEEL THAT BITCH? YOU FEEL THAT?!?! THAT'S WHAT YOU JUST DID TO ME! YOU TRIED TO CHOKE ME TO DEATH! YOU TRIED TO CUT ME OFF FROM MAKING BOSS MOVES!" Darnisha snarled as she tightened the thin brown cord around the girl's trachea.

Tasia fought and struggled, kicking her legs and trying to get out of her cousins' grip as Darnisha used all of her sheer strength to the cut into the girl's neck, pausing her air supply. As everyone could hear dense ruffled gasps of air barely escape from the girl's throat as she choked damn near to death, foamy spit formed at the corners of her mouth.

"DUMB UGLY BITCH!" Darnisha suddenly loosened her chokehold and threw her balled up fist into the girl's right temple, immediately rendering her dizzy, confused and partly unconscious.

The second Darnisha released her clasp around Tasia's neck, her head fell down to the floor. Her breathing was deep, loud and stabbing. The unexpected violence threw her into a panic attack which then triggered a full-on massive asthma attack.

Tasia tried to gain the strength to crawl out of harm's way, but that came to an abrupt stop once Jashaun punted the girl fucking hard in her stomach like he was kicking off the first quarter of Super Bowl.

"You fat bitch! You don't have no damn asthma! You just need to fucking lose weight you damn cow!" Jashaun laughed. He threw another kick, this time in her chest, instantaneously worsening her asthma attack.

Tasia's breathing, now harder and more pronounced, made it impossible for even the littlest amount of oxygen to fill her lungs and circulate through her body. Her limbs were now heavy like cinder blocks and every time she tried to inch closer and closer to her asthma pump, she felt the essence of her life discharge from her portly body.

Darnisha and her twins stood there, watching Tasia struggle for her life. Jasmine snickered. "Bitch, you look like a walrus slidin' to get some food!"

"Hahahah! I know right! Bitch act like she paralyzed or some shit! MOVE BITCH! You better get yo damn pump!" Jashaun rolled his hazel green eyes and neck as he held his folded arms up.

Darnisha dashed over to the kitchen counter where Tasia had an extra asthma pump resting near some restaurant take out menus. She grabbed the pump, stormed right back to Tasia and stood over her, dangling the inhaler as if it was a carrot trying to entice a small-brained, hungry white rabbit.

Tasia attempted her best to raise her hand to try to grab the inhaler, but every time she came within an inch's reach, Darnisha would quickly pull it back out of reach, taunting girl as if she was a stray dog on the streets looking for a bite to eat. "WHAT THE FUCK IS YOU GON DO IT FOR, YOU BLACK ASS FAT TARBABY?"

Tasia let out what to her felt like was her final cry and then collapsed to the ground as she continued to breath hard and heavy. As her chest went up and down, Jasmine got closer and shoved her foot into the girl's back, doing her best so suppress the girl's breathing.

Darnisha looked down on Tasia with ultimate hate and scorn. Out of nowhere, she hawked up some saliva in the back of her throat. SPIT! A big bulb of nicotine-laced slightly yellowish brown snot landed on the side of the girl's head and then oozed down her slightly edgeless temple, running into the corner of her eye. Seconds later, Darnisha was ready to conclude the beat down. She threw the inhaler at the girl like it was a bone. "You lucky you my sister's daughter, bitch…"

Once Tasia's watery eyes registered the inhaler, she reached for it and grabbed it. She blasted her mouth with as many pumps as she needed to end the imprisonment of her lungs to god awful crushing, stabbing tightness. Feeling somewhat relieved, she slowly rolled over on her back, continuing to breath heavy. Everyone else walked off and laughed.

"And you ain't getting' no dinner tonight. Learn how to survive off that shit in yo potbelly!" Darnisha grimaced as she made her way down the dimly lit hallway. "OH, and yo ass is grounded. Stay yo funky ass in the room for the rest of the week!"

~

Since living with Darnisha, Tasia was often the easy scapegoat for all the woes within the dysfunctional household. Whether it was the lack of finances, Darnisha's failed toxic and abusive relationships, the twins' excessive absenteeism at school, or just other random petty low life bullshit, Darnisha always managed to figure out a way in her sick, delusional mind to pin blame on Tasia. The insane aunt mastered the art of absolving herself of any responsibility for the myriad of fucked up problems she created in her and her children's lives, problems that existed way before Tasia even came into the picture.

For the last three years, Tasia became accustomed to her aunt's incessant, daily tirades laced with extreme verbal and emotional abuse. And this nonstop abuse all stemmed from Darnisha's delusional desperations mixed in with her deep-rooted insecurities as a struggling black woman trying to make sense of her life living in the hood.

All her life, she was gassed the fuck up by her no-good “can pass for white” alcoholic bitch-of-a-mother to be something spectacular and special. And her being “special” or “spectacular” had nothing to do with something unique like having an artistic or musical talent, displaying elite athleticism or excelling in school. Nope. Her mother, unfortunately, did a good job of teaching Darnisha she was special all because of her honey yellow skin complexion.

Her mother, Lorraine, clearly favored her over her older dark brown, “Jezebel” half-sister. Tasia’s mom, Latasha, was the byproduct of Lorraine’s tumultuous, violent marriage with her first husband, Charles, who left her after she got pregnant. Charles was an alcoholic and a heroin addict, and Lorraine’s parents warned her, foreshadowing if she married a “black ass nigga from the slums”, all hell would break loose in her life. And it did. However, once Charles was out the picture, it wasn’t a full two years later after Charles left, Lorraine got re-married to a dentist who came from a prominent “light skinned” Chicago family, resulting in the birth of Darnisha.

From the moment she was born, Lorraine encouraged her “princess” to walk around with an air of entitlement. Since Lorraine had so much scorn for Charles, she ended up having extreme disdain for Latasha. So every chance she got, she pitted the two sisters against each other all because Darnisha was born light skinned, had “good hair”, green hazel eyes, a nice build and features that had people always asking her if she was mixed.

However, as she got older, she quickly learned the hard way. Yeah, niggas might profess and be vocal about their addiction to pretty, thick, light skinned bitches. But that shit doesn’t mean shit ‘cuz niggas will fuck anything – black white, yellow, red, green, purple, or orange. Pussy is pussy. All a nigga wants to do at the end of the day is dip his hard big dick up in a bitch with a tight, wet, warm, juicy pussy.

All those years growing up, her no good mama put all these unrealistic high hopes and dreams in her head, teaching her to use her “mulatto” features as a key to a nigga’s pockets. Her mama told her no nigga with money and clout would want to settle down with a “nappy headed niggerette like your black ass sister”.

But all that turned out not to be true. A mishap ended up exposing a longstanding secret sexual tryst between Darnisha’s long-time nigga, Donterio, a well-known Jamaican drug lord and “nappy headed” Latasha. Darnisha’s world was turned upside down. All that “I’m cute ‘cuz I’m yellow, thick and got good hair” bullshit went out the window that night she learned the truth about Donterio and Latasha’s secret relationship.

And this all in all was the very fucking reason Darnisha constantly subjected her niece to such disgusting daily harassment. She still

wasn't over Donterio. And since she wasn't over a relationship with a nigga that ended over a decade ago, rather than move the fuck on like any other normal person, she sought retribution by abusing the very person who reminded her of that man. A man who she thought she deserved to be with all because of who she was on the outside, and not on the inside. That really fucked with her for years. What did Latasha have that she didn't have? She couldn't figure it out. But aside from her longstanding issues with feeling betrayed, Darnisha adopted her mother's same fucked up views on color. And now that Tasia was living with her, she made it her mission to remind the girl she wasn't worth shit simply because of how she looked.

Tasia represented the absolute opposite - the motherfuckin' antithesis to everything Darnisha saw as beautiful. Now ironically Darnisha had a thing for dark skinned niggas. See, being black as hell was perfectly fine on a man. In her twisted mind, the darker a man, the bigger the dick. However, on a woman, being black was ugly as fuck. Black was disgusting. "Dark girls look like they bathe in shit".

Then, what made Tasia's "dark shitty nigga skin" stand out more was her obesity. Although she was only 5'2, she weighed over 300 pounds. She had rolls in her neck. Rolls in her arms. Rolls on her back. In Darnisha's eyes, she was so disgustingly fat, she'd often put the girl on "food punishment", or forced her to starve for days in order to get her to lose weight. And to also save money so she could only buy shit for her kids.

And Tasia's hair. OMG. What a fucking mess. The poor girl hadn't had her hair styled in years. She used a hot comb to straighten out her "thick nigga naps" as Darnisha would say. Then there were her "nigga" features Darnisha ridiculed day in and day out. Her big "bell pepper" nigga nose. Her black nigga gums. Her big long nigga lips.

Since living with Darnisha, Tasia had been called every single fucking derogatory name and their thousands of variations under the god damn sun. Dumb fat black bitch. Nasty fat black bitch. Dumbo. Hippo. Precious. Shamu. Free Willy. Baboon. Gorilla lookin' ass bitch. Black fat hoe. Dumb black hoe. Blackie. Tar baby. Dumb nigga bitch. Cow. Heffa. Ms. Piggy. Bad Bodied fat black bitch. Knocked kneed fat black hoe. Fat Negress. Obese nigra. The list went fucking on. She'd been called out of her name so many times, it was to the point where everyone in the house called her more by a super-creative fucked up derogatory epithet than her real name.

All of this abuse Darnisha put her niece through though was a mask truly to disguise her self-hatred. Darnisha hated herself. She regretted having children. She still wrestled with trying to understand how a cascade of fucked up events in her life ended her up in the projects. As all of this was going on the back of her head, rather than

get some sort of help for her issues, she became addicted to using her niece and “monthly pot of gold” as a punching bag to relieve stress.

Up to this point, most of Darnisha’s abuse was very emotional and verbal. Time to time, things would get a bit physical. But the shit that just went down moments ago was the first time Darnisha, in collaboration with the twins, inflicted a new level of violent, oppressive physical and emotional pain on the unassuming girl. All over the most pettiest of reasons.

Truth be told, Darnisha was a straight up sociopath and didn’t even realize she was turning her own children into splitting images of her insanity. She let them do essentially whatever it is they wanted to do so long as you abided by her simple house rules. *“Don’t steal from me. Don’t try to fuck my men. Keep shit one hunned with me.”* And knowing that, Jasmine and Jashaun did whatever they fucked they wanted to do so long it didn’t conflict their psychotic mother’s “real bitch” philosophy.

Chapter Three

Tasia, wallowing in pain, tried her best to numb her mind and body from the brutal agony just wrought onto her innocent, self-effacing body. She knew the drill though. She had to stay her ass in her room until Darnisha gave her permission to leave. She knew the moment she "tried" to make any unsanctioned move, like use the bathroom, or even try to get a small bite to eat or something to drink, Darnisha would go crazy on her ass, probably even try to murder her for real.

All Tasia could do in moments like this was just close her eyes, meditate on the vast pitch darkness hidden behind her eye lids, and hope that there was a loving and benevolent God somewhere in the universe witnessing her pain, and he would deliver her from this fucked up situation.

The fucked up thing about all of this though was that Tasia had absolutely nobody she could go to and tell her story. No social worker. No friend. No teacher. No preacher. Not an single fucking soul could she go to and relay the abuse she suffered from Darnisha and her kids. She always figured that despite the slaps, occasional beatings, name calling and other heinous things Darnisha did to her, she could manage and grow from this. After all, she also developed in her mind that nobody would believe her because she was a poor communicator – a girl who had such an intense stuttering problem that people would spend more time focused on trying to understand the dribble coming out of her mouth rather than the substance of what she was saying. This was something she had to deal with all of her life; people staring at her, mocking her for her dark complexion, weight and her fucked up, overbearing stuttered speech.

Her watery eyes still tightly closed, Tasia did her best to stop her sniffling and crying. With the last remaining tears streaming out of her face, all Tasia could think about was wishing her mother was still alive. Although her mama wasn't the best of mothers, she didn't dare say or do some of the crazy shit Darnisha did to her. Her mother always told her despite her size and complexion, she was a beautiful girl, and that her true beauty was on the inside, and not on the

outside. It was something she always believed, despite the fact that the world always had a cruel way of telling her that her mother's advice was delusional fantasy and bullshit. Everyday she went to school she was bullied. Kids latched onto calling her the same derogatory shit –stupid, retarded, fat, black, whatever you could think of. No doubt that shit definitely hurt Tasia's feelings, but she somehowlearned to be resilient, and have a degree of faith that this too shall pass. She always had a seed of confidence in her reminding her that hopefully one day her situation would get better and she just needed to hold on. With that, Tasia slowly let go of her painful thoughts and did her best to slip away into sleep.

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SLAP! "Wake yo dumb ass up!" Aunt Darnisha stood over Tasia and slapped her awake. "Next time you fuck with my come up, I'm gonna kill yo ass for real, you understand me, bitch?"

Tasia, wide awake, eyes open like a fearful deer in headlights, slowly nodded her head. "Bitch! I DON'T HEAR YOU!" Darnisha screamed with a cocked back fist, ready to punch her niece if she didn't give her a verbal commitment not to fuck with her so-called boss moves.

"Ye-ye-yeee-yeesss, au-aauuu, aunty…" Tasia stammered, visibly shaken by the possibility of another vicious ass whooping. That's definitely the last thing she wanted, especially considering how just last night the crazy Aunty almost killed her ass.

"Good then, now I got someone coming over in a few hours. Get my house cleaned and put something decent on. I don't want you looking like a homeless dumpy bitch in front of company." Darnisha suddenly turned her attention towards the bedroom door and made her way out.

Once the door was closed, Tasia got up from her bed, rummaged through her dresser and quickly found a "decent" outfit she could put on for her aunt's company. She wondered who exactly this person could be, but knowing her and how many people she knew in the hood, Tasia didn't think twice about it. All she worried about in the moment was just following her aunt's exact instructions so she could make it through another day.

After Tasia quickly found her an outfit to wear and took a shower, she made her way out into the living room, and without thinking she quickly started running through a mental checklist of things she figured her aunt wanted her to do. Vaacum the floor. Clean the kitchen. Dust the living room furniture. Jasmine and Jashuan were off

fiddling around in their bedrooms, and Darnisha herself was holed up in her bedroom, spending so much time getting ready for her new guest.

After an hour had passed, Tasia still found herself tidying up until her aunt made her exit from her bedroom. Finally Darnisha's crazy ass made her way out to the living room, ready to inspect her niece's work. She quickly scanned the room, took out a pack of cigarettes and a lighter from jean's pocket, lit up a square and took a few puffs. "Good, you did good. You startin' to get the mothafuckin' point about my rules in my house. Now go wash yo black dusty ass up before you embarrass me."

With that said, Tasia made her way back to the bathroom, lightly washed her face, brushed her teeth for the second time, put on some body spray and made her way back into the living room.

Once she made it back out, Jasmine and Jashaun were finally in the living room, sitting on the couch, scrolling through their cell phones while Darnisha was checking herself out in a hallway mirror. Turning side to side, Darnisha was studded out in a black Gucci bodysuit, stilettos, and had her hair laid and slayed as if she was about to go out to the club and meet a boss nigga.

"Jasmine, how I look? You think these pants too tight?" Darnisha asked as she closely examined herself in the mirror.

"Nah they not tight, they make that ass look right, girl!" Jasmine chuckled. "Let's take a selfie!" Darnisha whipped out her phone, and Jasmine got up off the couch. The two of them posed in the mirror, popping out their ass and plucking up their titties in the mirror, trying to look like sexy bitches getting ready to go to a Gucci Mane concert or some shit. You'd think a mother wouldn't do such trifling hoe like shit with her daughter, but Darnisha didn't care because to her Jasmine was her protégé and one of her besties.

As the two carried on, Jashaun giggled as he scrolled through prank videos on Facebook, and Tasia sat off on a couch and just observed everyone off in their own world. Minutes later there was a hard knock on the door.

"Aiight! Ok ya'll don't be embarrassing me and shit!" Darnisha whispered with a smile plastered across her face. Jasmine and Jashaun both got super quiet, and Tasia got super attentive, wondering why Darnisha was putting on such a big act for her kids.

Darnisha then ran towards the door and quickly opened it, "AHHHHHHH!" She screamed as her eyes landed on this nigga who stood there wearing what obviously looked like a prison outfit. He was about 6'3, slender, muscular, light skinned and had a well-shaved head. With virtually no facial hair, he looked no older than Darnisha and if he was wearing regular clothes, you would've thought this

nigga was a model or something. “Damn, girl, yo ass ain’t aged a bit! You still look the same!” The dude on the other side of the door smiled and gave Auntie Darnisha a big ass hug. With the two tight in each other’s embrace, the teens sitting down were super-quiet and observant of their mother being seductively held by this unknown dude. Tasia however began to have a quick inkling that this dude was probably some nigga Darnisha used to fuck back in the day and his ass probably spent the last ten or twenty years locked up.

“Come on in, shit, it’s hot like a muhfucka outside!” Darnisha exhaled as she escorted the sexually attractive “prison bae” inside the apartment.

“Ay ya’ll, I want ya’ll to meet my high school sweetheart. His name is Tahmir. I remember I used to tell ya’ll about this dude from back in the day? Well he gon be staying with us for a minute.”

Tahmir just stood there, looking at everyone silently with a big anxious smile painted on his perfect white grill. Tasia, a bit scared, was somewhat overwhelmed by the man’s irresistible attractiveness. It was the first time she laid her eyes on an older man who somewhat piqued her interest. But she quickly fought off her innocent and faint desire and realized this was her aunt’s nigga and she better not dare do, say or even remotely make a look suggesting she had something for this guy. Shit, based on the way she got herself all dressed up and shit, looking like she was about to go out and get turned up, Tasia was smart enough to discern that her aunt was head over heels in love with this nigga.

“These my two kids, Jashaun and Jasmine. Ya’ll stand up and shake this man’s hand. He used to to be the boss back in the day. This nigga got clout!” Darnisha shouted.

Tahmir produced this somewhat non-agreeing, weird look on his face and rolled his eyes. “Yeah, yeah, yeah…keyword – back in the day. I’m a changed man now. I ain’t in that street shit no more.”

Jasmine and Jashaun both quickly stood up and gave the man a handshake. He then turned his attention over to the other couch that Tasia was sitting on and then he curiously looked at Darnisha. Darnisha didn’t say anything until it finally hit her that she should’ve also mentioned Tasia. “Oh, shit, I almost forgot. You remember Latasha. This her daughter Tasia. I gotta take care of her now ‘cuz Tasha passed away.”

“Damn, I’m so sorry to hear that.”

“It’s cool, she brought it on herself…”

Weird silence engulfed the room. Tasia’s heart sunk because she couldn’t even believe her aunt would let such a bold, fucked up statement roll off the tip of her tongue like that. Latasha hadn’t even been dead for a full two years, and here Darnisha was passing such

extreme judgment on her sister in the most untactful way.

Tahmir's face turned neutral, but then he formed a smile and walked over to Tasia. The anxious niece stood up and slowly shook the man's hand as she somewhat trembled. "How you doing? Wow, you do kind of favor your mother! Both ya'll got that deep dark skin! You are gorgeous just like her."

"Plhhhhh! Nigga what? Please, that black fat monstrous bitch." Darnisha rebuffed at Tahmir's compliment.

Tahmir screwed his face up and looked at Darnisha, "Aye man, that ain't cool. This is a child. That's a fucked up thing to say. Is you crazy as hell?"

"Man, whatever," Darnisha rolled her eyes and folded her arms as she rapidly tapped her foot on the ground. Jasmin and Jashaun were lightly chuckling because they didn't expect Tahmir to check their mother like that.

"Anyways, don't let yo crazy aunty talk like that to you. I'mma get her in check for you. You and I we gon be good, ok?"

Tasia looked at Darnisha and then back at Tahmir. She slowly nodded her head, but she knew if she looked too giddy in thinking Tahmir was gonna change shit up around here Darnisha was gonna show her otherwise. She was the real bitch in charge, and despite what little assurance Tahmir could give her that things could change now that it was sounding like he was going to be staying there a while, Tasia knew deep inside not to push the envelope. Two years of back to back, incessant abuse would do that to you. Make you fear when fear sometimes isn't even necessary.

But with all that said that, Tahmir walked back up to Darnisha, hugged her and squeezed her thick ass, "Man, stop being such a hard bitch on these kids. You gotta let them live."

"Ok, well, since you gon be the man of the house now, you gon get them in control, bae…" Darnisha uttered as she landed kisses up and down Tahmir's neck.

"Bet…Anyways, ya'll hungry? Shit, a nigga ain't ate good in years!"

Both Jasmine and Jashaun laughed in unison at Tahmir's statement. Tasia still sat there quiet but slowly let out a slight chuckle. Darnisha looked onward, rolled her eyes and huffed. "Anyways, what ya'll want to eat? I feel like eating some crab legs tonight. Tahmir and I finne take an uber into the city to go shopping, and we might stop by Angry Crab. What ya'll want?"

"Oh hell yeah! That's my spot!" Jashaun shouted. "Heyyyyyy!" he continued in a somewhat gay-sounding voice. "Lemme get a pound of shrimp, extra spicy and some garlic noodles."

"You know what I want girl!" Jasmine mumbled to her mother.

Darnisha already knew what Jasmine's favorite was – a softshell crab sandwich and fries.

"Got it…Anyways, we'll see ya'll later. My bae need to get some new threads!"

"Damn, you know gon ask what Tasia want to eat?" Tahmir interrupted, showing concern for Tasia.

"Boy, she on a diet. She can't eat salty foods. She need to lose weight according to the doctor…" Darnisha lied.

Tasia just sat there, feeling deprived and ashamed that Darnisha would even dig further into her like that in front of someone she didn't know, although to an extent, you'd think by now she'd be so used to the incessant beratement. However, no amount of mistreatment, regardless of how less traumatic it may seem is still traumatic to a growing teenager struggling with her sense of self and her place in the world.

Chapter Four

"...That'll be $452.67 Ma'am..." The cashier at Nordstrom rung up all the clothes Darnisha was about to buy for Tahmir. Darnisha quickly rumbled through her Gucci purse, whipped out her wallet and handed the cashier a credit card.

"Can I see ID, please?" The young white girl cashier smiled and asked as she held onto Darnisha's credit card, waiting for her to show proof it actually belonged to her.

"Sure," Darnisha then pulled out her ID and handed it to the girl. Once the cashier quickly scanned the ID, matching the name on the credit card to Darnisha's ID, she swiped the card and handed Darnisha a receipt. "Ya'll have a wonderful evening," the cashier then turned her attention to the next customer in line.

Tahmir grabbed his bags, and both he, fresh out of prison, and his new girlfriend, walked out the department store and meandered through the dimly crowded mall. "I wanna stop and get a pretzel... Remember how we use to eat those back in the day?" Darnisha laughed as she rubbed Tahmir's broad right shoulder.

"Shit, hell yeah! Where they at?" Tahmir exclaimed, giddy to chow down on a cinnamon sugar pretzel from Aunt Annie's. As the two made their way to the Aunt Annie's, Tahmir and Darnisha engaged in some light conversation, reminiscing about back in the days when he used to be that nigga in the hood, and how everyone feared him, including Donterio, her once longtime lover, and now Tasia's dad.

It's crazy because although Darnisha was head over heels in love with Donterio, the truth was, she always had a thing for Tahmir. Back in the day, Tahmir was known as King T, and he was one of the biggest drug bosses in Chicago. In fact, Donterio used to work for him. But after Tahmir got arrested and was sent away to prison, Donterio took over the dope business. Tahmir was locked up for nearly twelve years, and being away for that long in a maximum security prison with little connection to the outside world, Tahmir was forced to change his ways. Long gone were the days of hustling in the streets, and now he found himself wanting to start over in life and do shit in a respectable and legitimate way. While in prison, it was obvious by his cut and chiseled body he found a passion for fitness, and now he had a mission to get certified as a personal trainer and get a gig with a gym.

Darnisha, out of all the people Tahmir knew, was really the only bitch who tried her best to stay in contact with Tahmir and help him through everything. She'd send him letters, occasionally put money on his books, and from time to time, would make visits to the prison to see him. She did a good ass job keeping the relationship secret, but now that he was out, she was ready to take shit to the next level and get him back on boss status.

As the pair continued pacing their way through the mall, Tahmir had a lot of curiosity on his mind when he saw how his bae was swiping her credit card left and right with no concern for money. For a bitch to be living in the PJs, she had the spending habits of Ivana Trump or some other rich white bitch. "Damn, Darnisha, so tell me, you up in the Gardens and shit, but how in the fuck can you afford to be buying all these clothes? You get that much assistance from the government?"

Darnisha screwed her face up in contempt over Tahmir's line of questioning. "Ughhh, nigga please, I'm a business woman. A boss bitch gotta have multiple lines of income," she insisted as if she had everything in control and he didn't need to worry about how she was getting hers. "All you need to know is I'm doin' me."

"Income like what? Like legit money?" Tahmir asked.

"Legit money…besides, why you all up in my shit? I handle mines, bae. Trust me, I ain't some dumb bitch out here scheming. I get a check from the government to take care of Tasia's bad ass. I also get some other things here and there. And then from time to time, I do hair and babysit. I'm thinkin' about opening up my daycare. All these silly bitches out here with these kids need affordable daycare. I'm gon be the one!" Darnisha laughed, the two making their way closer and closer to Aunt Annie's.

Tahmir's eyes turned to judgmental slits, "Yeah, well, just take it from me, all money ain't good money," he warned. "Anyways, wassup with Tasia though, why you talk like that to her? You know that's kind of fucked up, right?" he then asked with a raised eyebrow. He already had a feeling Darnisha was on some slightly shady shit when it came to her treatment of her only niece.

"First of all nigga, I don't need you teachin' me how to parent and shit…Besides, you don't even know half the story. Don't let her weight and stutter fool you. She stay in some shit – ALL the time. She is a strain on me. I gotta watch her too 'cuz she got this tendency to lie and steal shit. Always sneakin' around and lyin' about shit. My shit always used come up missing ever since her dumb ugly ass had to move into my house."

For some odd reason Tahmir kind of didn't believe her story. He just couldn't wrap his mind around the fact that someone would be

that cruel and demoralizing to a young teenage girl. “Hrrrm, are you for real? What’s her issue?”

“Pleh, I don’t even know. She just like her dumb ass mama. Always lyin’ and shit. That’s why that silly bitch dead now.”

Tahmir shook his head, “Damn, what happened?”

“Her dumb ass got caught up with crazy nigga, and he ended up chopping her stupid ass up into pieces.” Darnisha had no shame of telling him about her sister’s tragic story.

Tahmir was perplexed. “Shit, word? Like a serial killer or some shit?”

“Yeah…This crazy nigga was going around killin’ hoes and shit. Latasha’s dumb ass was sellin’ pussy on Craig’s List and got caught the fuck up. Now I gotta take care of her crazy ass dumb ass daughter because I’m her only surviving relative and the State is giving me a nice check to take care of her until she turn 18 or some shit like that…”

“Damn, well, still. I mean, it sound like she been through a lot. I think maybe you should just let up a bit on her. Kind of mentor her. Help her lose weight. Shit, I could help her out with that. But where Donterio at? Why ya’ll fell off?”

“Yeah, well, if you wanna volunteer to do that shit, all power to you, but I’m just doing the basics with her. She really gets on my damn nerves though. Man lemme tell you. Yesterday, her ass fucked around and got my Section 8 voucher app denied over some stupid shit. And as for Donterio – that nigga just upped and disappeared. I don’t know what happened to him to be honest with you. I heard from some peoples in the streets that his ass fled to Florida. Changed his name and everything.”

“Damn…That’s crazy as shit. What happened to make that nigga do that shit?” Tahmir couldn’t believe a real street nigga like Donterio would bust a punk ass move like that. That shit went all the way against street code. But because he was locked up for so long and had no outside communication, Tahmir never even got the scoop on Donterio and other dope business-related news.

“Look…” Darnisha rolled her eyes, wanting to quickly move on and talk about something else. “It’s a long story. I”ll tell you some other time. Just thinkin’ about Tasia, and even Donterio is giving me a muhfuckin’ headache now. I’m just so done with being in the Gardens. I don’t want my kids in the fuckin’ projects no more. I can’t stand that shit. You know me and how I was raised. That shit is just too much.”

Sensing Darnisha was wanting to drop the subject, Tahmir wrapped his arms around Darnisha, “Well, I’m home now, bae. We gon grind and get our shit together. I’mma focus on getting this personal trainer certification and you gon work on getting that

daycare. And we definitely finne get the fuck up out the projects 'cuz truth be muhfuckin' told, that shit is grimy as hell."

She smiled and rubbed his chest, "Hell yeah, we gon do it boo… Shit, I got a plan. We gon work this shit and get ours. Anyways, let's get this pretzel." Darnisha and Tahmir finally arrived at Aunt Annie's.

After getting their pretzels, the two chowed them down and made their way out of the mall. Darnisha hailed for an Uber on her iPhone to take them up north to Angry Crab. Once the old African Uber driver came and picked them up in his Toyota, the new couple headed to the seafood restaurant to grab dinner for the family. On their way, the two not giving a fuck, started making out in the back seat. Being locked up for so many years, you already know Tahmir's dick was harder than stone mountain and he was ready to bust Darnisha's pussy walls wide open.

"Man, I'm so fuckin' horny. A nigga been locked up for years, but shit I'm also hungrier than a muhfucka. I'm so conflicted," Tahmir chuckled and whispered as he dry rubbed Darnisha's fat pussy print that was popping through her bodysuit.

Darnisha licked and kissed the side of his tatted up neck, sending blood down to his groin at a million miles an hour. "Shit, well, we can always get something to eat later because I know you really hungry for this juicy pussy. So what you wanna do?" she asked.

Tahmir didn't even need to really think about this one. Of course he had every intention on pounding her cooch once they got back to the crib, but this nigga was seconds away from exploding nut all over the place like a broken fire hydrant. He was still hungry, his stomach growling like an angry starved bear. But with the way Darnisha was rubbing his hard long thick dick, almost making him damn near bust in his pants, his ass was willing to sacrifice his appetite so he could in slide up in her gooey guts.

"But the kids though. What they gonna do?" Tahmir scratched his head, questioning the plan with slight apprehension buried in his tone. It was funny how he was more concerned about the kids and what they were gonna eat and do for the rest of the night than Darnisha's trifling ass was.

Darnisha groaned. "Man, fuck them kids. They grown as hell. I'll call'em and let'em know we finne get a room at a hotel and they need to find somethin' else to eat," Darnisha murmured as she kept landing wet succulent kisses up and down her sexy ass nigga's muscular neck. This bitch was too ready to jump on the dick. And truth be told, if the windows on the Uber's car were tinted, she would've already had Tahmir's dick gliding in and out of her mouth.

Tahmir chuckled at her statement. "Man, you a savage for real for real," he stammered as fought the urge to just whip his dick out and

stuff it down Darnisha's throat.

"Shit, I got a loud pack and some pills. We can get turned all the way up." Darnisha suddenly leaned forward, ready to get the Uber driver's attention to tell him to change their destination.

Tahmir just thought about something Darnisha told her weeks ago. He suddenly tapped Darnisha to get her immediate attention."Wait, wait…Damn girl, aren't you pregnant? I forgot!"

Darnisha rolled her eyes, "Boy, I'm only two months. Besides, my doctor said weed don't really do nothing to babies."

"Bitch, you crazy as hell. We ain't doin' that shit and you pregnant. You gon fuck that baby up!"

"Look, I don't even know if I'm gonna even keep it, so it is what it is. Besides, that nigga who got me pregnant is a wreck. The last thing I need is another child to take care of and giving me more headaches than I can manage."

Confusion swamped Tahmir's mind. He couldn't believe she was just that willy nilly over her pregnancy. "What? Man, you tweakin' for real."

"Man, gosh, you overthinkin' this shit. You know you want this pussy, boy. Stop playin'. Just relax." Darnisha tried her best to assure Tahmir there was nothing wrong with getting a little high while pregnant. Besides, she truly was on the fence about keeping the baby anyways. Ignoring Tahmir's growing reluctance, and needing to get his mind back onto her salivating, dripping pussy, she unzipped his pants and slowly whipped out his erect dick oozing with precum.

Tahmir's eyes twisted wide and scared as he hurled his attention to the front of the car to see if the Uber driver was watching them. "Yo, what is you doin'?" Tahmir whispered, somewhat fearful the Uber driver would suddenly see them, get mad, pull over and kick them out the car.

Placing her index finger over his long damp lips, Darnisha muzzled Tahmir's unease. "Shhhh," she cut his growing tension. Then she buried her head down into his lap and without hesitation stuffed his hard dick in her mouth, beginning to give bae the most reckless sloppy toppy she'd ever given in her thirty years of slutty existence.

Trying his best to block out his paranoia, Tahmir closed his eyes and began to enjoy the Darnisha's hot and wet tongue dance up and down his hardened, veiny brown shaft. A few seconds passed, and she emerged from his lap and stroked him as she kissed him on his lips, infusing his mouth with full on seduction to keep his mind on banging out her cooch.

She smiled, "Mr. Uber Driver…" Darnisha said, wanting to get the attention of the driver, who didn't seem bothered with or aware of what was happening in the backseat of his car.

“Yes ma’am,” he responded in his thick sub-Saharan African accent.

“We finne change my drop off. Take us to the Holiday Inn in Harvey off Halsted.”

“Yes ma’am…” The Uber driver busted a u-turn and headed towards the expressway to take the horny ass couple to the hotel off in the far south suburbs. Tahmir put his semi-hard dick back into his pants, and Darnisha whipped out her phone, and called Jasmine.

“Wassup, ya’ll back on ya’ll way?” Jasmine asked.

“Nah…Tahmir and I finne get a room tonight at a hotel. Ya’ll need to find somethin’ else to eat. You got money on yo debit car, right?”

“Yeah, I got like $50. I guess we can order a pizza or some shit.” Jasmine responded, kind of giddy her mama and her new bae weren’t gonna be home tonight. Knowing she was a carbon copy just like her mama, Jasmine was already scheming on what she could get into now that he had a night free to herself.

“Cool. And stay yo ass out of trouble. Don’t let me come back to my house in a wreck. And tell Jashaun he better stay out of my weed stash, or next time I’m gon beat his ass for real for real.”

Jasmine laughed. “Ok, girl. I’ll holla at ya’ll later.”

“Cool, and tell fat black bitch she need to stay in her room too.” Darnisha scolded, then hung up the phone.

Making their way closer and closer to the hotel, Darnisha was ready to get all the way turned the fuck up. While in the back seat, she had already rolled her up a big ass blunt of some OG Kush loud, ready to light that motherfucker up once they got outside the car. Before they got to the hotel, her and Tahmir popped a few e-pills and made the driver stop at a liquor store along the way so they could buy a big bottle of Tahmir’s favorite – some henny. Arriving at the hotel, Darnisha and Tahmir got out with their bags.

“Hrrrm, I got a better idea,” Darnisha smiled and licked her lips.

“What’s that?” Tahmir asked as the two of them walked into the hotel lobby.

“Well, you a king. And a king deserves royal treatment. I’mma hit up my homegirl Shatoya. You gon have two bad bitches tonight, bae.” And with that, Darnisha hit up her bestie and arranged for her to come down to the hotel so both of them could fuck Tahmir’s brains out of his skull.

Chapter Five

A few days, actually damn near a week had passed. Darnisha still hadn't brought her carefree reckless ass back home. She left Jasmine, Jashaun and Tasia to pretty much figure out their situation. However, this wasn't the first time Darnisha left her kids alone like this. Of course fucking not. In her mind, her kids were damn near grown ass adults and they should be able to handle their own. Shit, she had to when she was their age, so she figured they had the grit to do the same. And of course she didn't give a two fucks about Tasia's ass, so it was all good on her end. She just wanted to get as much carefree dick out of Tahmir as possible before she had to uber her ghetto ass back to the projects.

With Darnisha pretty much MIA for an entire week, by this point it was already Friday afternoon, around 1 PM. Tasia was sitting in her social studies classroom, anxious to give a presentation at any moment now. Her bad stuttering mixed with her prolonged anxiety in regards to how everyone treated and viewed her was taxing her nerves so bad.

There were times here and there where she would have to give small presentations in different classes, but today was going to be exceptionally brutal because she needed to give a much longer presentation on what she wanted to do with her life after she graduated from high school. She thought about this presentation long and hard all week. All week she prayed for a brief moment God would lift her stuttered speech and give her the ability to talk with no interruption.

In all honestly, it was a desire to have her stammered speech lifted from her permanently, but what she more so wanted for right now was just temporary relief. Temporary relief since she just wanted to make it to the end of the day, happy, having peace of mind knowing nobody would try to laugh or mock her for her giving a presentation on her lifelong career aspirations. Despite Tasia being considered borderline mentally retarded and being pushed into some special ed classes, Tasia was truly a smart and intelligent girl who unfortunately was pushed into being labelled "dumb" or "challenged" simply because of her looks, speech and worse of all, the brutal maltreatment

she experienced on a consistent basis living with Darnisha combined with the trauma of losing her mother in the most callous and heinous way. Going through so much at an early age can be paralyzing to a child, and it was so easy for people on the outside to judge her, and write her off as another unfortunate statistic and byproduct of the grim reality of the hood. But deep down, Tasia was determined to eventually make it out and pave her own way, despite the objections she had to face not only from her own family, but even from the despondent and callous teachers who made it a point to always point out Tasia's seeming flaws.

"Are you ready Tasia?" Mr. Gretzky, her social studies teacher immediately grabbed Tasia's attention, letting her know it was her turn to get up and speak. Billions of butterflies all of sudden invade the deep pits of her stomach. Her mouth began to get super-dry. Lightheadedness swamped her, making her feel somewhat dizzy. "Ye-ye-yees," she murmured as she got up from her seat and couldn't help but notice all the judging eyes on her.

Making her way to the front of the class, light chuckles echoed throughout the shaggy inner city highschool classroom that was packed to capacity. Absolutely fucking dreadful. Holding nothing but a piece of paper, Tasia trembled as she slowly opened her mouth. "Wh—whh…whhhhh. When I gg-gg-ggggggg-gggget ollll-oll-ollll,"

"GET IT OUT BITCH! SHIT!" one of her loud and typically rambunctious classmates took it upon herself to get Tasia to get out what she was trying to say.

Tasia froze and her quivering intensified, as it became obvious to Mr. Gretzky. He grumbled and shook his head. "Tasia, we don't have all day, we got ten more people to get through…" Mr. Gretzky chided.

"Ok…" Tasia mumbled.

"Wh..When I grr-graduate from school, I would like to gg-ggg-ggggo to coh-cohh-colllege and ss-sss-sssstudy to bec-becccc-beccoome a lawyer. I wou..would like to hel…help chhhchhhhchhh…"

A few hard laughs suddenly exploded, and the rest of the class took it as a que to explode in laughter as well.

"Hey! That's not funny! You all need to show her respect." Mr. Gretzky yelled, snapping everyone back into quiet.

Tasia didn't know if she had the patience or stamina to continue. She just wanted to cry, but that wasn't an option since she knew if she let her tears stream down her face, she would look even more crazy in front of everyone. Doing her best to attempt to finish her story, she continued for another five minutes, talking about how she wanted to become a family lawyer and help children navigate through the foster care system.

Mr. Gretzky looked uninspired and was just ready for her to finish

so he could move on to the next student. After she was done, she made her way back to her seat, and thanked God for giving her the energy and courage to finish her speech. After the rest of the students got done giving their presentations, the school bell rang, as it was time to transition to the last period of the day. Tasia gathered her belongings and was ready to make her way to her last class of the day, her remedial English class, until Mr. Gretzky stopped her dead in her tracks. “Hey Tasia, let’s speak for a moment. I’ll write you a pass so you won’t get written up.”

“Ok-kk,” Tasia stammered as she walked over to Mr. Gretzky’s desk. Since the last period was actually Mr. Gretzky’s planning period and he had the rest of the day to himself, he wanted to sit her down and have an honest conversation with her. Mr. Gretzky was an older white man, in his mid-50s and he was one of the few white teachers at the school.

“So, good job on the presentation. You’ve made a lot of progress. You should be proud of yourself,” he smiled in a nonchalant manner. “However, I have some concerns. Let’s talk about this career aspiration you have.”

“Ok-kk…” Tasia looked at her teacher with confusion. Why did he have concerns she wondered.

“Well, do you think it’s realistic you could go off to college, survive four years, and then turn around and do another three years in law school, an internship and all other types of things? You working against a lot of odds, missy.” Mr. Gretzky thought he was being thoughtful and understanding, attempting to take into consideration what he thought was Tasia’s grim reality. Maybe years of working around so many black kids in the hood who start off having so much potential to only turn around and become worthless and broke in society made him feel this way. Like he needed to inject Tasia with a reminder of where she came from based on his perception of her limited potential.

“I..I-i-ii I d-dd-ddon’t know.” Tasia shrugged her shoulders. She honestly didn’t know what to say in response. Of course she knew had to go to college and law school, but the way Mr. Gretzky framed it, he made it seem like it was a goal so out of reach for her. It was a slap in her face to hear Mr. Gretzky even say this to her in such a condescending manner. Although he seemed to be aloof most of them time, and just seemed like he was already burned out from working in the school system for such a long time, he was one of the only few teachers who seemed to recognize some form of potential in her. But I guess now she was gladly mistaken. He was just like the rest of them – quick to reinforce the idea she was slow or not up to par, and that she was delusional if she thought any type of challenging higher education

was for her.

“Here, I was thinking about you the other day. I did a career readiness workshop at Morton Community College.” The overly presumptive and condescending white teacher who thought he was doing something special, pulled out a course catalogue and a pamphlet from his drawer and handed it to her. “This is their current catalogue. Look over it and check out some of the programs they have there. You can do many of these programs in less than two years. Become a CAN, an LPN, or something really basic in the medical field. There are a lot of jobs in the medical field.” He then flipped to the culinary studies section in the catalogue. “Don’t you like to cook?” he laughed, showing her a myriad of pictures of culinary students in white cooking hats and restaurant uniforms.

“Ye-ye-yess…” Tasia lowly answered.

“Anyway it’s just food for thought. I don’t want to discourage you, Missy. I just want to set some real life expectations. It’s hard out there.” Mr. Gretzky pulled out a permission slip, quickly filled it out, and handed it to Tasia so she could make it to her next class with a solid reason in hand.

Tasia took the slip, gathered her belongings and made her way out of the classroom and on to the next. After her last class of the day, Tasia hopped on the city bus and quickly made her way back home. When she got into the house, the first thing she noticed was two big boxes of pizza sitting on the dining room table. No one around, so she assumed that Jasmine or Jashaun had ordered food for everyone. The entire week, they weren’t as crude to her. She figured since Darnisha was out the house, and they had a lot more freedom and independence to do whatever they wanted to do, they weren’t on the bullshit since they were living it up as well.

Tasia hadn’t eaten all day. In fact, she didn’t have any lunch money, so she invited herself over to the dining room table to grab a slice of pepperoni pizza. She opened one of the boxes, but before she could even reach and grab a slice, someone stopped her dead in her place. “Uhh, no! Don’t touch it! That is not for you!” A voice screamed from the hallway. It was Jasmine, and as soon as Tasia turned around to look at her cousin and ask why, Jasmine was already an inch in front of her face, vexing her for even dare attempting to grab at her food without asking.

“Whh-whhy not? I ddd-dddidn’t eat ll-llll-lu-luu-llunch,” Tasia stammered. Jasmine didn’t give a fuck though. She closed the box, grabbed both boxes of pizza and began making her way down to the living room hallway to her room. “Eat a bologna sandwich or somethin’! I got this for my friends! And stay yo ass in the room. Mama told me she’ll be back tomorrow afternoon, and she want you

to stay in yo room all night." Jasmine echoed before closing her bedroom door.

Tasia grew visibly upset as she marched to the kitchen, opened the fridge and became displeased at what she saw…An empty ass fridge with nothing but a half-empty pitcher filled with Kool Aid that was made last week, a pack of old bologna, and some bread she had no idea how old it was. She didn't want that shit, so like any other time when she was forced to go without, she went right to her room, and poured herself into a Maya Angelou book she was reading, hoping the words would distract her from her voracious hunger.

~

Hours passed. It was already close to 10 PM, and Tasia woke up from a long nap. Her stomach by this point was more than growling and her mouth was extremely parched. In her mind, she had to do what she had to do in order to quell her hunger and thirst, so she sucked it up, and decided she was going to fry her some bologna and make a sandwich. She got up out of her bed, opened the door, crept down the dark hallway, not hearing any sound coming from Jasmine or Jashaun's room. She assumed maybe since they had one more night of absolute freedom, they left the house and went to a kickback or something. Finally making her way closer to the kitchen, she came to an abrupt stop once she heard deep faint moans bouncing off the walls of the dimly lit, smoke-filled living room. She crept behind the wall to get a visual of exactly what was happening, and what she saw almost instantaneously made her nauseous and scared. Her scared eyes attached to her cousin, Jashaun, bending over with his pants down and ass cheeks fully exposed. One man was standing behind him, his ass cheeks exposed too, pumping in and out of Jashaun's bottom. Another young male had his pants down too, but was in front of Jashaun, grabbing and massaging his head as he fellated him. Tasia stood there, shocked and frozen, completely paralyzed by witnessing her cousin having sex in the living room with two other men. She covered her eyes and mouth, doing her best to block out the graphic imagery. Her natural instinct was to yell and scream, but she knew she'd get herself into some shit had she opened her mouth. Her hunger and thirst dissipated, and now she was truly concerned for her cousin because she didn't know if her cousin was being forced into this situation. Was he being raped? Who were these two guys she wondered. Slowly opening her eyes again, this time wanting to get a quick scan to make out these men who were doing these things to her cousin. Her mind exploded into a million pieces once she was able to make out who the two guys were. Tasia was absolutely fucking

shocked to see that LaMarcus Jones and Marshawn Taylor, two top basketball players in the school, were the ones having sex with Jashaun. She had a few classes with those two, and from what she knew, they were definitely the high school jock types that always had all types of young, fast ass girls after them. She was so accustomed to hearing those two constantly brag about their sexual trysts in class, the last thing she thought was that these two would turn out to be some closet homosexuals.

As Tasia stood there, quietly observing the entire situation, she was getting to the point where she wanted to vomit all over the place. Once the three came to a climax and put their clothes back on, the three of them sat on the couch, watched TV and lit up a blunt. LaMarcus pulled out his wallet and handed Jashaun a couple of twenties. Minutes later, the two high school jocks dapped up with Jashaun and made their way out of the front door. Jashaun quickly closed his eyes and fell asleep. Tasia needed to cool out for a second, so she sprinted back to her room, sat on her bed and gathered her thoughts. Seeing those two dudes having sex with her cousin, who she never really suspected were even gay, was one thing. But then seeing them give him money was also a gut-wrenching revelation. Tasia wasn't dumb. She knew exactly what her cousin was doing – he was prostituting himself out to guys in the hood.

As minutes passed, Tasia's hunger and thirst came back full speed. She made her way back to the kitchen so she could finally fix that fried bologna sandwich and pour herself a big glass of Kool Aid. Once in the kitchen, she rumbled the fridge, whipped out the old deli meat, some bread and the Kool Aid, and began cooking. Jashaun, who was now awake, stood up, and stretched out into the living room.

"Hey…You woke me up," Jashaun looked at Tasia like she was crazy for cooking this late at night. "You know yo ass don't need to be eatin' this late anyways."

"Ss-ss-ssorry," Tasia was a bit petrified and taken aback by the fact that just an hour ago, she saw her cousin getting hammered in the ass by another man.

He rolled his eyes, "Whatever…I'm finne go to bed. Mama comin' back tomorrow, you know that right?"

Tasia nodded her head yes, "Ye-yeah, Jasmine told me."

"Cool. Just make sure you clean up everything tomorrow. She gon be mad if you don't get this place together."

"Okkk…"

Jashaun exited the kitchen and made his way to his room. Finally focused back on her making her sandwich, Tasia's mouth dropped and she became disappointed once she realized the bologna meat was spoiled. It was slimy, and had green spots speckled all throughout its

surface. The bread too was moldy. She wouldn't dare put that rotting food in her mouth, so she did everyone a favor and threw everything away. She opened the freezer, popped a few cubes of ice in a glass, poured herself some Kool Aid and drank away. Once she was done, she tidied up the kitchen and went back to bed. She'd just have to deal with hunger later.

Chapter Six

A long string of carefree giggles coming from Jasmine and Jashaun filled the apartment living room while their worried cousin Tasia tirelessly worked to tidy up the apartment before the arrival of Darnisha's crazy and belligerent ass. Slaving away in the kitchen to get everything spick and span, and obviously not wanting to piss off her abusive aunt, Tasia worked with fury to make sure the entire apartment smelled like fresh roses while her lazy ass cousins goofed off. She didn't even bother to ask them to help her. She figured they would've tagged team and tried to beat her ass or torture her for even dare suggesting they help out.

11:02 AM splashed across the tiny apartment oven clock. Tasia looked over at the clock and knew she was racing against time since her aunt told her cousins she was going to be back before noon. She rapidly worked to wipe down everything with Pinesol, not wanting a single particle of dirt to be found on the floors or countertops. Moments later, the front door of the apartment creaked open. "Wasssup!" Aunt Darnisha chuckled in her half ass Martin Lawrence voice.

"Shit, wassup with you?" Jasmine laughed, getting off the couch to go hug her mama, like they were besties or siblings. Tahmir, standing behind Darnisha, slowly walked through the door with some shades on his face and plenty of shopping bags in his hands. "You got us somethin'!?!" Jasmine snickered, rummaging her fingers through the bags, being all nosey.

"Girl, get out of my shit!" Darnisha slapped Jasmine's hands out of the bags. "Get yo own shit. This for me and my bae."

Tasia, still in the kitchen, didn't pay attention to any of themShe just wanted to make sure the kitchen was perfect because she knew at any moment her sadistic aunt was going to make her way into the kitchen and begin to nitpick at everything.

Once Darnisha and Tahmir were fully inside the house, Tahmir made his way to the back of the apartment to the master bedroom to put up the bags. Jasmine sat back down on the couch next to Jashaun and drove her attention into her iPhone. Darnisha standing in between

the living room and the kitchen, pulled out a pack of Newport's, slapped a square in her mouth, lit up and took a few puffs. "So what ya'll did this week? Ya'll miss me?" Darnisha asked.

"Same ole, same ole. Different day, same shit…" Jashaun mumbled as he scrolled through his phone.

Darnisha took a puff and blew smoke out the side of her puckered lips. "Yeah, well, I had me a nice lil staycation."

"So when ya'll gon get married?" Jasmine asked with sarcasm infused in her question.

"Girl, mind ya bidness. Anyways, ya'll better not had wrecked my house up…." She took a few more puffs from her cig. "Tasia, where you at girl? You can't even say hi to your own damn auntie?" Darnisha rolled her eyes, blowing a big thick smoke cloud out of her dark purple lips.

"Hhey…" Tasia mumbled as she wiped down the countertops.

Darnisha made her way into the kitchen, looking around, examining to see if everything was up to her standards. But shit, truth be told, she just wanted to go into the kitchen and start fucking with Tasia over nothing. She knew the kitchen was clean, but she had to find something to point out wrong, even if it wasn't wrong. Darnisha walked over to the fridge, opened it up and quickly slammed it. "Damn, ya'll ate up all the bologna and what not?!?"

"Nah, that was Tasia's big ass!" Jashaun echoed from the living room. "I told her she should've bought some more food for the house," he lied.

Darnisha's eyes turned to long slits. She rapidly tapped her foot against the kitchen floor with the half-smoked Newport still dangling from her crusty lips. Square smoke fumes were coming from her nostrils like she was a medieval dragon. "So is it true?" a now angry Aunt Darnisha asked, viciously staring at Tasia.

Tasia, perplexed, looked at her aunt, trying to quickly come up with a reasonable explanation. But she already had one. The meat was spoiled. The bread turned moldy. And she definitely didn't have the funds to go out and get groceries for the house. Jasmine and Jashaun were the ones who were given an allowance. They should've been the ones to go out and make sure the fridge was full, or at least had something in there. But they didn't do that. They were eating out left and right all week and had no regard for their cousin.

"Auu-auuunty, dd-ddd-dd-dddda meat ww-ww-wwww—wwwwwent bad. I hhh-hhahhaad to throw it away," Tasia stammered, an ocean of anxiousness overtaking her portly body.

Hearing those words were like lighting a short fuse on a pack of TNT. Darnisha lunged at Tasia without warning. "Say what?" she growled. "You threw my muhfuckin' food away, you inconsiderate fat

bitch?"

"I hhah-hhhhahhhad to. It www-wwww-as—"

"IT WAS WHAT!?!? GET IT OUT DUMBO!" Darnisha interrupted with extreme rage, lighting up the entire house with her ratchet scratchy voice.

Tasia scrunched her face up because she knew what was going to happen next. A full-on ass beatdown. Arming up her reflexes, getting ready to defend herself, Tasia stood alert. She was ready to guard herself from thousands of punches, slaps, kicks and jabs she anticipated from her psychotic "guardian".

"WHERE IS IT!?!? WHERE THE FUCK IS IT?!?!" Darnisha rummaged through the trash can sitting next to the fridge. She ran her hands through the half-filled garbage bag, " …AND YOU AIN'T EVEN BOTHERED TO TAKE THE MUHFUCKIN' GARBAGE OUT!?!?"

Her eyes registered the pack of spoiled bologna and the moldy slices of bread sitting on top of empty Harold's Fried Chicken containers that were covered in remnants of barbecue sauce and ketchup. Without giving a flying fuck, she took the spoiled food compost out the trash can and threw it onto the clean countertop in front of Tasia. "BITCH! THAT WAS ALMOST $40 WORTH OF FOOD! YOU THINK I'M LIVING IN A LAP OF FUCKIN' LUXURY AROUND THIS BITCH, YOU FUCKIN UNGRATEFUL HOE?!?! YOU KNOW WHAT BITCH, YOU GON EAT THIS SHIT UP!"

Darnisha grabbed Tasia, whose watery eyes turned red, and shoved her against the countertop and slammed her face in front of the pile of food. "BITCH, I WORK HARD FOR THIS AND YOU JUST THROW MY FOOD AWAY! EAT IT BITCH!"

Jashaun and Jasmine all of sudden got up from the couch so they could witness, possibly partake in the sadistic action. "Ahahaha, that fat hoe finne eat old ass bologna," Jasmine chuckled as she whipped out her phone, ready to record what was about to happen for the 'Gram.

Tasia was obviously super-scared and reluctant to eat the food. It was already spoiled and rotten, and then had been sitting in the trash can for a good day. Even the pungent smell was inducing her to almost vomit all over the place. Darnisha sensed Tasia's fear and reluctance, so now she took it a step further to prove her point. Without hesitation she grabbed the slimy, rotten meat and forcibly shoved it into her mouth, "Open yo mouth! OPEN IT!"

"Nn-n-n-n-oooo," Tasia stammered, scared to have the rotten meat go into her mouth and down her throat.

Hearing Tasia's refusal was her que to ramp up her attack. The insane aunt then dashed towards a drawer, pulled out a sharp steak knife, and then held the tip of the blade up to Tasia's neck. "BITCH! IF

YOU DON'T EAT THIS MEAT, I'M GON SLICE YO THROAT WIDE OPEN!" Darnisha wasn't playing at all, and she meant every word. She was willing to murder her niece if she didn't eat the rotting, green dot-speckled slimy meat.

Tasia succumbed. She opened her mouth, instantaneously blocking out the putrid smell and horrid taste of the rotting meat touching her tongue and roof of her mouth. She was ready to blow chunks all over the place, but of course she knew if she even dared let a small fleck of vomit land on her aunt, she would definitely go OJ on her and slice her throat in half. As her teeth slowly grinded through the meat, Tasia let the greenish slimy foul protein slide down her throat. She just hoped she wouldn't get any type of food poisoning.

With her obese body quivering in fear, she continued to chew on the food. Jasmine and Jashaun were just so astonished and humored their mother would even go to such lengths to prove a point – a point that was obviously illogical, terrible and deranged. Moments later, Tahmir stormed down the hallway and into the kitchen area, looking somewhat angered. He heard all the commotion minutes ago, but was using the bathroom, so he couldn't immediately intervene. "YO! Darnisha, what the fuck is you doin' man!?!?" Tahmir lunged at Darnisha and grabbed her off Tasia.

"NIGGA, I TOLD YOU! WHEN IT COMES TO MY CHILDREN, BACK THE FUCK UP. RESPECT ME IF YOU WANNA STAY WITH ME!" Darnisha screamed, pointing the knife at Tahmir.

It was truly odd as fuck to Tahmir, and he was now looking at his "new" woman with scorn and distrust. What the fuck was going on in her mind? Who really was this bitch, Tahmir thought as he screwed up his face, ready to almost punch or slap her back into reality. Tahmir didn't expect to see this side of Darnisha, and he was quickly questioning whether or not it was a good idea to be staying with her. He was just trying to get his life together, and didn't want to be caught up in Darnisha's drama.

Suddenly Tahmir flipped back into "King T". Without even thinking about it, the OG street nigga grabbed the knife out of Darnisha's hand, grabbed her by her throat and slammed her against the fridge. Jasmine and Jashaun, ready to intervene to stop the potential fight between their mother and this "new nigga", stormed into the kitchen. Tahmir, while still grabbing Darnisha by the throat, cocked his other hand back, ready to inflict violence on the twins if they dared tried it with him. "GET THE FUCK BACK! GO TO YOUR ROOM! YOU TOO TASIA! I NEED TO TALK TO YOUR MAMA'S CRAZY ASS!"

"NIGGA GET THE FUCK OFF MY MAMA!" Jashaun screamed, ready to duke it out with the OG, but Tahmir threw his fist into

Jashaun chest. The blow was so hard, Jashaun fell to the ground and looked like he was ready to cry. Jasmine and Jashaun definitely took that as a warning sign to step the fuck back and get cover because this nigga wasn't the one to fuck with.

With the kids gone out of the kitchen, Tahmir looked deep into Darnisha's eyes, "Let me tell you somethin', bitch…As long as I'm gonna be stayin' in this house, you not gon do that shit to that girl. If I ever catch you again doing something crazy and reckless, my fist is going across your face." Tahmir warned. See, the truth was, Tahmir had nowhere else to go. He couldn't go to a halfway house and he had no family of his own he could rely on for support. Darnisha was the only one he could rely on, and thankfully she was there along the way while he was imprisoned. He already peeped her game, but he was going to show her what the real fuckin' deal was gonna be. Darnisha assumed wrong in thinking she could use her help and assistance to assert control over him, and just use him for dick until she got bored with him. In Tahmir's mind, if he was gonna make this living situation work, he was going to have to immediately put his foot down and show her despite the fact that he needed her help, he wasn't gonna stand for no bullshit so long as he was going to be living there. And that meant the days of abusing Tasia were done.

Darnisha, still pinned against the fridge, trembled with full fear because she quickly realized despite Tahmir being a changed man, he wasn't just gonna let some bitch and her trifling children try to punk him out. He may not be the same violent drug boss that used to run the streets, but he still had the might to fuck someone up if they crossed him the wrong way. "We gon be makin' some changes around here ASAP…" Tahmir leaned in and kissed Darnisha on her rosy, tear-covered cheek. "Now go wash up, change out of them funky ass clothes, take yo ratchet ass to the grocery store and have my dinner ready in an hour. I want steak, sweet potatoes and green beans. AND BUY ENOUGH FOR EVERYONE INCLUDING TASIA! I'm gonna go workout…Oh, and get ready to show me all them checks you getting for Tasia. I need to watch your spending habits too…" Tahmir demanded, letting Darnisha go. Maybe shit was gonna be different now…hopefully.

Chapter Seven

Many weeks had passed, and it was quickly becoming Summer in Chicago. Now that Tahmir was claiming himself to be head of the household, the entire dynamic of the house had shifted. Darnisha found herself being completely submissive and obedient to every command coming out of Tahmir's mouth. Whether it was the clothes she was wearing, getting in control over Jashaun and Jasmine, finances, the treatment of Tasia, etc., Tahmir was proving himself more and more everyday he was the responsible, caring role model and authority figure much needed in the house.

However, this wasn't exactly what scheming ass Darnisha planned for. But truth be told, she had no other choice but to bow down and acquiesce to the sudden changes. She quickly realized Tahmir was on to her and he could easily throw her under the bus by reporting her ass to the authorities for child abuse, neglect and fraud. See, her low life ass did such a good job of concealing her bullshit from others, and she truly presumed Tahmir would just turn a blind eye to her antics. She thought since a nigga was out of prison, and just wanted a nice bed to sleep in at night, and some tight pussy to dip in, he'd just let her do her thing while he did his. WRONG. See, Darnisha thought she was playing her cards right. All these years she maintained this secretive relationship with Tahmir in hopes once he got out, he'd get back heavy into the streets, reclaim his glory as a kingpin and make moves to upgrade her lifestyle. Typical gutter hoe dreams. Always wanna get up under a nigga who's committed to a fast life filled with unscrupulous, meaningless shit. But she thought fucking wrong.

This nigga already knew the bullshit she was on from day one. Tahmir wasn't putting himself back into the streets. The game changed. Young niggas out here were killing each other left and right in the Chi over bullshit. And the dope game was definitely in the drought. Besides, he was much older now, and matured out of hood shenanigans.

Now you'd think a nigga like Tahmir who wasn't on the lease of her apartment, had a record, on probation and had nowhere else to go would be more careful not cross a certain line with Darnisha's

obviously crazy manipulative ass. He already knew what kind of low-life scandalous shit Darnisha engaged in, but he was willing to put up with it and use it to his advantage, at least for the time being. Before he even got out, he was able to put two and two together. He knew she wasn't doing legit shit around the crib. He knew she was a liar, but he was determined to stamp that shit out of her and get her to change her ways. Why? He saw some inkling of potential in her. If he could just get her to stop being such a fast ass bitch and realize you gotta have more sophisticated finesse, she could go places. The other reason why he was willing to stick it out with her is because he honored loyalty. One thing he could admit to himself is she was truly there when no one else was. Yeah, granted she might have had ulterior motives, but she still went out of her way to help him out when he was locked up, doing time in the feds.

Although Darnisha wasn't feeling the sudden and abrupt change being made to how she was running shit in her house, she quickly strategized on how she was gonna use the new situation to her advantage. So just as much as Tahmir had a plan, she figured she better come up with her back up plan just in case Tahmir took her down a path she absolutely was not willing to travel.

All in all though, with the sudden change in the house, Tasia found herself having a huge sigh of relief. She quickly grew fond of Tahmir, not just as a liberator and protector from Darnisha, but he was proving himself to be the father figure she never had. The father figure she always craved. She never had the chance to know her real father, Donterio, and she figured she'd never have that opportunity, since he was virtually nowhere to be found.

As time went on, Tahmir found himself wanting to help out Tasia and be an advocate for her. He knew Darnisha wasn't doing jack shit for her until his arrival, but he wanted to change all of that. School was out for the summer and Tahmir saw it as an opportunity to use the next three and a half months to seriously change her situation.

Sunday afternoons were usually Tahmir's rest days for the gym, but knowing he had a limited amount of time to work with her before the start of school, he now gonna work out seven days a week with her to get her in the best shape of her life.

It was 10 AM. Everyone was awake. Jasmine and Jashaun were in the living room watching TV as usual. Tahmir gave up on trying to be an influence on those two bums. But he had a plan for their asses that was for sure gonna catch them by surprise. Ironically Darnisha was wide awake, in the kitchen, slaving over a hot stove, fixing Sunday breakfast for everyone. By this point she was already close to five months pregnant, and her belly was showing now more than ever. She was going to give birth to a baby boy and was going to name him

Khai.

"You ready Tasia?" Tahmir asked, knocking on her door to see if she was done putting on her new gym outfit. Tasia opened her bedroom door, looking a bit disappointed.

"What's the matter?" Tahmir examine the outfit and thought she looked fine.

"Iiii-ii ddd-dd-ddon't wan't ppppp-epppeppppeople to sss-ssssss-ssse my jiggle," Tasia confessed as she pulled on her shirt, trying to not have it fit tightly around her chubby and curvaceous body.

Tahmir smiled and wanted to assure her she looked perfectly okay. "Don't worry youngin'. Before you know it, that weight is gonna be gone and you are gonna want that shirt to fit tightly."

He wrapped his arm around her and escorted her down the hallway. "Gotta have more faith in yourself, Tasia. Look, I wanna show you something."

"Okkk-kk-kk," Tasia said, following Tahmir down the hallway and into the living room. With Jasmine and Jashaun attached to the television like mindless zombies, and Darnisha finishing the last batch of Tahmir's favorite whole grain blueberry pancakes, he led the reluctant and low-self esteem having girl to the hallway mirror. "Stand up straight…" Tahmir commanded like a drill sergeant.

Tasia slowly straightened her spine, rolled back her shoulders, fixing her posture in the mirror and smiled. Extremely shy, she was flattered and taken aback Tahmir was showing her all of this attention. He leaned into her presence and whispered in her ear, "I want you to practice and meditate on this daily every time you look in the mirror…Say this with me – 'I am worthy of love and joy.' I know it sounds corny, but trust me. You keep sayin' that, soon you'll realize just how much you are worth. Don't let no one tell you otherwise, even your crazy ass aunt. Come on, now you say it…"

Tasia looked deeply into the mirror, gazing into the reflection of Tahmir's wise eyes. She let go of her fear of not wanting to sound dumb by stuttering. She creaked her mouth open. "I-ii-iii a-aa-aaam wwww-www-wwwworthy of lll-llll-loove and joy," she managed to squeeze out the saying.

"Good. Practice that every day. It'll change your life…Trust me." Tahmir assured her as he patted on her back. "You ready to work out?"

"Ye-yeah," Tasia stammered, a bit scared of what type of workout Tahmir was going to put her through.

"Ya'll, breakfast is ready. I'm soooo tired. Shit, I think I need to lie down for a second," Darnisha exclaimed, trying her best to get Tahmir's attention away from Tasia and to her.

Darnisha observed Tasia and quickly noticed how much attention

Tahmir was showing her, and she absolutely hated every second of it. Why was he so giddy about helping her out, she wondered? Did he have a thing for her? Was he molesting her? Darnisha's eyes turned to venomous vicious slits as she grew puzzled over this brewing "daddy-daughter" relationship between Tahmir and Tasia.

Tasia still stood in the mirror, and was reciting the saying over and over again the best way she could without stuttering as much. Darnisha grew annoyed of her feeling herself. "Tasia, ma'am, you've been standing in the mirror long enough. Go wash your hands and come eat breakfast so you can go do whatever ya'll got to do. I don't wanna waste your 'daddy's' time," Darnisha exclaimed with full sarcasm as she fixed the table.

Tahmir scrunched up his face. "Why you said it like that?"

"Because…It's true. You tryin' to act like you her father or somethin'. She already got a daddy. She don't need another nigga trying to fill her with extra confusion."

"Whatever, you tweakin'. And on that note, you can go on somewhere with that negative bullshit. I'm trying to help the girl. Unlike others…" Tahmir fake smiled as he sat down at the table and forked through the pancakes.

Darnisha rolled her eyes. "Whatever you say…Anyways, I'll be in the bedroom trying to nap. I feel nauseous."

"Cool…" Tahmir didn't even look her way as he began to chow down on the pancakes. "These are good Tasia. Yo aunt know how to do somethin' right around here."

Jasmine and Jashaun laughed in unison at the smart remark.

Darnisha busted out laughing. "Hahah, Chris Rock…Funny…NOT" Darnisha fake smiled and walked off even more annoyed.

Tasia walked over to the dining room table, sat down, bowed her head and blessed her food. After she got done eating, her and Tahmir headed over to a gym in the local park district not too far away from Altgeld Gardens.

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"COME ON BOY! LIFT IT BOY! COME ON!" A group of older bodybuilders were standing over a bench press machine, helping one of their guys press a bunch of weight. The gym this time of the morning was filled with nothing but a bunch of local meatheads from the neighborhood who spent their Sunday mornings bench pressing, talking shit about the pussy they tasted last night and other typical hood nigga topics.

"Don't be scared. They good peoples…." Tahmir chuckled as he observed the group of guys making all that ruckus in the gym. Tasia

was the only young girl in the gym among a sea of guys who looked buff, and intimidating as shit.

"We gon start off with a warm up on the treadmill. We gon run for like fifteen minutes, ok?" said Tahmir as he then proceeded to help Tasia onto a treadmill. Getting onto the treadmill next to her, Tahmir then programmed both machines' settings and started them up. "Come on, let's go. You got it girl!" Tahmir picked up the pace on his treadmill and began running.

Tasia tried her best for the first two minutes to keep up with the jog, but immediately found herself almost out of breath. Tahmir looked over at her and smiled, "Don't give up. You doin' good. Keep going!" He didn't want her to just easily given in.

"I-I-I-III-I-II'm tryin'!" a breathless Tasia tried her best to keep going, but she felt like her asthmatic lungs were about to collapse.

She tried her best to continue, but eventually the weight and gravity of fighting for air was crushing her chest. She went on for another minute, attempting hard to prove herself to Tahmir. But suddenly, she felt panic invade her body. Not wanting to jeopardize her left, she pushed the emergency stop button, and hopped off the machine and began crying.

Tahmir stopped his treadmill, got off and went to go console what appeared to him to be a letdown and broken Tasia. "You aiight?"

"N—nn-nno…I have asthma," she cried, pulling out her asthma pump. Once she got relief from the asthma pump, she stood there, bawling and without hesitation dashed away.

A bunch of onlookers began staring at the two, and the anxiety of the full-on embarrassment was making Tasia want to go into immediate hiding. Tahmir luckily caught up to her before she tried to take cover in the woman's locker room. He pulled her off to the side to a dimly lit staircase. "Tasia, calm down. I got you. You thought I was gonna let you hurt yourself?"

"I-II-III-I don't k-kknow," she moaned and wiped her chubby dark cheeks free of tears.

Tahmir grabbed her and hugged her. "Listen, I got you. I'll never let you just hurt yourself like that. I care about you too much to see you get hurt, ok? You my little protégé. I'm here for you. You just gotta trust and believe me."

Hearing those words instantly melted Tasia's heart. It was the first time in a long time someone actually verbalized their devotion and care for her. She became so accustomed to not trusting anybody, not even Tahmir up until this point since she was so used to being broken by so many people, even her own family.

Why was this man, who she only knew for a few months, so kind to her, she wondered. Hugging him back, she gave in and realized she

had no one else to turn to. No one else who showed her any real regard other than her own mama, and she hadn't received that type of attention since her mother's disappearance and death.

Tahmir walked her back inside the gym, and back to the treadmills. "Listen, let's start slow. And we are gonna work our way up, ok? Once we get done, we gonna hit them weights, girl. I gotta teach you how to get them muscles. Trust me, I'm gon get you right by the end of the summer. Watch and see." Tahmir assured her, rubbing her back, trying his best to inject a lot of confidence into his de facto daughter.

After he started up the machines, the two of them did intervals of jogging and walking. Tasia felt much better about the situation, and was growing more and more confident by the minute that she was going to enjoy working out and exercising. After they were done, Tasia trailed behind Tahmir to the weight area, reciting in her head, "I am worthy of love and joy…"

As days went on, and weeks passed, Tasia's confidence in exercising grew tremendously, and she started seeing immediate changes. She never knew she'd enjoy working out so much. She was actually starting to become more pumped up to go than Tahmir's ass. Tahmir was honestly flattered by her newfound passion. Taking it day by day, he was slowly transforming Tasia into a woman he knew had so much potential. He was so thirsty to help her out and get her up to par, he even went out of his way to find her a speech pathologist to work on her stuttering problem. Within weeks, she was showing a remarkable improvement. So much improvement, Tahmir himself managed to convince the school psychologist and principal at her high school that she didn't need to be enrolled in anymore special education classes.

As more time went on during the summer, and her pounds melted away, Tasia was evolving more and more into a stunningly beautiful and physically attractive young woman, although still thick in some ways. By the end of the summer, her speech impediment was almost gone and she was damn near a hundred pounds lighter. More brazen and bold, her personality did a complete 180, all thanks to Tahmir. So many people noticed Tasia's remarkable transformation, even her crazy ass aunt who was reaching her tipping point with everything. Tasia, in her mind, was getting way too much fucking attention from a nigga that was supposed to be her man. And in her mind, this "little black bitch", who was supposed to be just a paycheck for her, was not a thorn, but a fucking sharp needle in her side now. Tahmir came in, flipped the script and ruined her gig. Since Tasia no longer needed special education classes, and he even managed to get her off disability for her so-called ADHD (yeah, Darnisha deliberately had the

girl misdiagnosed to get extra money from the government), the money well was evaporating. Now, Darnisha conspired day by day, to come up with a plan she knew for sure was gonna put an end to all of the madness. She was already over Tahmir, but just kept his ass along for a dick ride. But she figured once she delivered Khai, she was gonna quickly get rid of his ass, and go back to plan A. And plan A meant she had to let Tasia know she belonged to her, not Tahmir.

Chapter Eight

"Sharay Jackson…" Mr. Thrumball, the young, gregarious and flamboyant English teacher at Corliss Highschool, was taking attendance on the first day of school.

8:45 AM hit the classroom clock. Dr. Whitaker, the school's principal, just finished making announcements over the school's intercom. The newly transformed Ms. Tasia was sitting in her first class, a tad anxious, but also excited because over the summer she went through a complete crazy ass upgrade. She was no longer the Precious-looking special ed student who stuttered every word that streamed from her mouth. Now she looked like Keisha Knight Pulliam's thick doppelgänger. But her looks weren't the only thing that changed – her attitude also went through a complete 180. She wasn't going to stand for people's fuckery, and if anyone tried it with her, she developed the gall and brazenness to check a bitch or punk ass nigga for trying to cross her the wrong way. Boy oh boy, man, let me tell you – that damn Tahmir did a number on her. He took a girl who virtually had no will to fight, and turned her into a relentless, savage princess warrior who would fuck any and everything up on sight if people wanted to take it there with her.

"Tasia Johnson…" Mr. Thrumball called Tasia's name, getting her immediate attention. Suddenly his beady, morning crusty eyes zoomed in on her. Some of those eyes she recognized like Marshawn, the nigga who she caught along with LaMarcus fucking her cousin, Jashaun in their living room.

"Here…" Tasia responded with loud, echoing confidence, without stuttering. From the looks on some of the kids' faces who knew Tasia last year, you could tell they were a bit shocked that she responded so effortlessly.

Mr. Thrumball continued taking attendance until he called off every name on his roster. Once he was done, he asked everyone to write a short essay on their goals, what they wanted out of life, and where they saw themselves in the next ten to fifteen years. It was an exercise in teaching kids the power of visualization, and he wanted them to try to picture themselves a decade from now. Pretty crazy,

given that just a few months ago Mr. Gretzky, her social studies teacher, had required Tasia to do a similar exercise. But then it was a disaster. Now she was going to use this opportunity to triumph. Now she was more emboldened, empowered, and ready to show the world that no one was going to write her off again as a worthless "dumb fat black bitch". She was ready to stake her claim in the world.

Tasia immediately whipped out her composition notebook and began to zip away, pouring out her heart onto the pad. Thinking about all she went through – losing her mother, not knowing her real father, being abused for years by her aunt and cousins, then finally being "saved" by Tahmir by the grace of God, was her motivation to take her life to the next level and not let anyone or anything stop her . She was a beast, and now she was determined more than ever to not let any trial or tribulation hold her back from realizing her dreams and ultimate destiny.

An hour had passed, and Mr. Thrumball was ready to start going through the class and hear from everyone. "Who wants to go first?" Mr. Thrumball asked, as he fidgeted with his well-manicured beard, scanning the classroom filled with young black and brown faces, looking for ample volunteers.

Without reluctance, Tasia quickly and fearlessly raised her hand, "Me…" She confidently stood up without her teacher's permission and walked up to the front of the classroom. Heads turned, eyes rolled, and some people were astonished that Tasia was so geeked up to get in front of everyone and speak. Some, still shocked by her summer change, were anticipating she'd eventually stammer over her words, and voilà, the illusion of her change would end – she'd return to her normal, shy, stuttering self.

"Go ahead, Ms. Johnson…I love it when students take initiative!" Mr. Thrumball exclaimed in a stereotypical gay lisp and smiled at her as he stood off to the side. He was impressed that she took full control.

"Thank you, Mr. Thrumball…" Tasia then flipped open her composition book, quickly scanned her notes, and without hesitancy she dived right in without having to refer back to her essay. Her eyes zoomed right into her classmates.

"My mentor once told me, '…Ordinary people believe only in the possible. Extraordinary people visualize not what is possible or probable, but rather what is impossible. And by visualizing the impossible, they begin to see it as possible.' I can't stand up here and pretend, as some of you already know, that I had a perfect life. This time last year I was a completely different person. I had no belief in myself. No self-esteem. I was just thankful to see another day. I've lost so many people in my life who meant so much to me. Endured so much. Took so much. But I believe now more than ever, despite so

much seeming impossible, I'm going to go to college. In fact, I'm going to the University of Miami. I'm going to study political science and minor in Spanish. And then I am going to law school. My top choice is Howard University in Washington, D.C.. After I graduate, I have a mission to work as a family attorney and a child advocate to help kids and teens like myself navigate the foster care system, or help them when they are in juvenile detention…"

Tasia recited her whole entire future mission without stuttering, impressing so many people who thought she was bound to trip over her words. Honestly, those young and immature punks were hoping she'd fuck up so they could bust out in laughter. But she didn't. Everyone remained silent and her brashness and confidence was a seal on their mouths. They had no other choice but to respect her. Once she finished her speech, she sauntered back to her seat, sat down, and listened to everyone's "wack ass dream" speeches. Listening to everyone else, she was just so stunned so many of her peers were stuck on doing the typical young hood nigga shit – become a rapper, baller, open up a hair salon, CNA, etc. But she understood why. Over the summer, Tahmir told her the reason why so many niggas were trapped in the hood was because they are trapped in their limited minds and perceptions on what was possible, and what was impossible. He constantly reminded her day in and day out that she needed to defy all odds and expectations, and believe and know the impossible can become the possible if you work hard at it. His daily advice was fuel for her change, and it was obvious like a motherfucker that she internalized every single word.

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English class let out. It was noon – lunch time. Tasia walked through the halls of the raggedy school and to the cafeteria so she could spend her hour reading and eating her lunch. She refused to eat the cafeteria lunch, so she had a bag packed with a salad, a protein shake, some boiled eggs and a granola bar. Once inside the cafeteria, she found a somewhat empty table, sat alone by herself, and pulled out her lunch. The lack of company didn't bother her, but she knew based on the faces people were making the moment she entered the cafeteria, she was the source of extreme attention. And by different, she wasn't wearing the typical faded, barely fitting hobo outfit everyone was accustomed to seeing her wearing . She no longer had an unkempt hairstyle. She was rocking a Gucci skirt and a matching long-sleeved dress shirt, making her look more like a staff member at the school than a student. Although she lost a considerable amount of weight, she was still thick, and was working to lose her last remaining thirty

pounds. She now had accentuated curves, well-developed breasts and her face was no longer extra-chubby. Despite now only being 16 years old, she looked like a full-on woman. Tahmir even warned her earlier that morning before she left for school she was going to get a lot of attention from these young reckless niggas, so she needed to be super-careful not to fall for their thirst traps.

A group of young, trifling-looking bitches, passed by Tasia , who was minding her own business, reading a college catalog from the University of Miami and eating her lunch. Ironically, Jasmine, her cousin, was in the group of young girls, and looked annoyed and disgusted when she walked passed her kinfolk.

"Hey cousin," Jasmine fake smiled, getting Tasia's attention.

Tasia looked up and saw her cousin, the obvious leader of the pack of young THOTs, staring her down, tapping her foot against the floor. "Wassup," she murmured, as she snacked on a boiled egg covered in sea salt, pepper and paprika.

"I've been hearin' you the talk of the town. How does it feel to know you don't look like a fat black slave no more?" Jasmine joked. The once-abusive cousin's group of friends busted out laughing.

Tasia fake smiled back at Jasmine, "It feels great actually. Funny thing is, at least I'm humble enough to admit where I came from. Unlike others…who like hiding the fact they are only 16 and already had three abortions and five STDs…" God damn…Tasia went there – she dug deep in the back of Jasmine's closet and pulled out a thousand skeletons, and had them on display for everyone to see like they were at the Smithsonian Museum in DC.

Jasmine's friends bit their lips and went silent. From the gaze on their make-up covered faces, you could tell they didn't know how Jasmine was gonna come back from that one.

Hearing Tasia's piercing rebuttal threw Jasmine into fury, and without warning, lunged in front of Tasia's face, "BITCH FUCK YOU! I'LL BEAT YO MOTHAFUCKIN' ASS RIGHT HERE IN FRONT OF EVERYONE IF YOU THINK YOU GON TALK SHIT TO ME HOE!" she screamed, getting a bunch of onlookers to observe what might potentially be a fight.

A few dread-headed niggas, sitting on the end of the cafeteria table, whipped out their cell phones, "WORLD STAR!" one of them yelled, thinking a brawl was about to ensue.

"Really, cuz? That's what you on?" Tasia's eyes turned to unblinking slits, staring down the angry and embarrassed cousin.

Jasmine was gonna learn today . The days of bullying, abusing, and taking advantage of Tasia were over, and although Tasia still had to wrestle with the anxiety of never being in a serious fight before and she didn't know what was about what was going to happen next, all

she could see in her mind was red. Crazy thing is, and no one else really knew this, but this past summer, Tahmir also got Tasia into boxing and Brazilian jiu jitsu. Although she still had a lot to learn, Tahmir had the intuition to know he needed to get her to learn as much self-defense skills as possible in the event he was no longer going to be in the house. He wanted to make sure his protégé developed the basic skills to truly defend herself, and inflict serious damage if the situation called for it.

"YEAH BITCH! THAT'S WHAT THE FUCK I'M ON!" Jasmine screamed. Tasia stood up, smiled, and without warning lunged at her cousin, grabbing her by her weave, and slammed her against the lunch table. Jasmine tried to fight back by throwing a few swings. A massive crowd encircled the girls as a fight broke out between them. But this shit wasn't a fight. This was a straight up ass whooping, because Tasia successfully put her cousin into an almost lethal chokehold.

All the memories and flashbacks of her cousin stomping on her, kicking her, spitting on her, and what not was gassing her up to potentially murder her relative in front of hundreds of high school students. But Tasia, barely able to manage her newfound rage, was really trying to reason with her inner beast to not kill this stupid young hoe.

"Let me tell you something, you trick ass slutty ass bitch. The next time you think you gon' try to show out in front of your friends, I will gladly send you back to your maker. And maybe, just maybe, he'll bless you with another chance at life since you ain't doin' shit with the one you got now," Tasia growled then suddenly let her go as a group of security guards came out of nowhere, breaking up the thick crowd of onlookers and intervening between Tasia and Jasmine.

Jasmine stood up, shook herself, as streams of tears trickled out of her eyes, ruining her mascara and foundation. Quivering and shaken by the surprise of damn near being choked to death, she was trying to do her best to catch her breath. She quickly fixed her rumpled clothes, adjusted her misaligned and crooked sew-in, and wiped her face free of tears. You'd think her friends would've helped her, but those fearful stupid bitches were taken aback by Tasia's strength and grip.

"What's happening here?" Some fat ass, out of shape security guard nigga who looked twelve months pregnant huffed, pulling Jasmine away.

"Just mindin' my owns. Tell her she need to find her some so she can stop fuckin' with me," Tasia spat as she sat back down, looking unbothered. She dived right back into her lunch and college course catalogue like she didn't have to almost send her cousin to the hospital.

"Ya'll need to get it together! It's the first damn day of school and

shit! I ain't got time for this Jasmine Johnson! I done already told you I was gon send you to the principal's office if you was gon start shit this year, so come with me!" The security guard then grabbed Jasmine as she protested him hauling her off. "We ain't done bitch! Know that!" Jasmine threw one last parting shot at Tasia before she left the cafeteria. But that threat didn't faze Tasia one bit. "Whatever hoe," Tasia mumbled under her breath, as she looked at the different political science classes that piqued her interest.

Chapter Nine

Three months later…

"…See! I let you stay with me and now you comin' in here tryin' to raise my mothafuckin' kids! You got me all the way fucked up! Who the fuck you think you are!" It was a chilly fall Wednesday, and Tasia found herself walking right into a full-fledge argument between Darnisha and Tahmir. The arguing couple was in the living room going at it. Darnisha just gave birth to Khai about a week ago, and it was obvious by the dark circles under her eyes, the loss of bodyweight and her unkempt appearance that having to nurse an infant was taking an extreme toll on her.

Tasia briefly interrupted the argument, "Hey Aunty and Unc, I'm about to head out to the gym and then the grocery store. Ya'll need me to get anything?" Tasia kindly asked. As much as she hated her aunt, she somewhat pitied her. The more Tasia matured, the more she realized her aunt was just a basic bitch with basic life aspirations, who was going to be in her seemingly cyclical, dreadful situation for the rest of her life. She couldn't quite grasp though why Tahmir was so stuck on being here with her, and why he was putting up with her bullshit. She figured there was something Tahmir had up his sleeve, but couldn't quite figure it out yet. She wanted to ask him so badly what he saw in Darnisha, but she just decided to keep her mouth closed. The truth was, Tasia had a year and half left in high school, and she knew from there she'd be done with dealing with her crazy ass aunt and this horrible living situation. Her goal was to just ride the train until she got to her next destination – the University of Miami. However, seeing how there was some growing tension between Darnisha and Tahmir, Tasia hoped nothing incredibly insane would happen over the next year or so. Being very observant of her aunt's growing post-partum depression and anxiety, she just wanted to do her best to make sure her aunt had everything she needed so she wouldn't fuck around and do something crazy to baby Khai. Of course she obviously was aware her aunt had it in her to do reckless shit for the pettiest reasons. Knowing this, her goal was to ensure the baby's safety.

“Lil girl, mind ya own business! You don’t see me talkin’?!? And he’s NOT your fuckin’ uncle!” Darnisha chastised Tasia, but her niece wasn’t moved.

“Ok, sorry for asking,” Tasia took that as her que and made her way to her bedroom to throw on her gym outfit, and grab a few dollars from her piggy bank. As she walked down the hallway, she passed Jashaun’s partly creaked open room door. Chris Brown’s “Take You Down” filled the room and poured out into the hallway. Tasia was so fucking fearlness now, she had no shame snooping in on her cousins. Like a spy, she quietly poked her head through the barely open door and watched for about a half minute her gay ass cousin slow grind on another boy whoshe recognized from school – Kevon Miller, a popular drug dealer who had the connect on loud and pills. Tasia’s face scrunched up at the site of her cousin digging his plump ass into the young drug dealer’s lap. Kevon was wrapped up in ecstasy and had his hands on Jashaun’s hips, synching in movement with him. “Fag ass niggas,” Tasia mumbled under her breath.

Without warning she busted through the door, obviously not giving two fucks. Kevon quickly tried to play it off and shoved Jashaun down to the ground, “Bro, you play too much!” Kevon growled, standing up, getting his jacket and putting it on.

“What ya’ll was doing, wrestling or something?” Tasia joked. “I didn’t know wrestlers practiced to Chris Brown…”

“Man, we was just coolin’ and shit,” Kevon responded with nervousness buried in his tone. He wondered if Tasia saw what they were doing moments earlier.

“Ay cuz, next time KNOCK! All disrespectful and shit bustin’ up in my room. Fuck outta here with that shit!” Jashaun got up off the ground, turned off the music blaring from his speakers and got up in Tasia’s face. “GET OUT NOW!” he commanded.

Kevon tried to squeeze between the both of them and make his way out the door. “Ahhumm,” Jashaun barked, attempting to get Kevon’s attention.

Kevon quickly and nervously hunted through his Bulls jacket, whipped out a bag of weed and threw it at Jashaun, “Here…” Then he proceeded to make his way out of the apartment.

Tasia folded her arms, scanned Jashaun up and down, and shook her head.

Jashaun rolled his eyes, “Bitch, fuck you. You think just because you all fit and shit, you can do whatever the fuck you wanna do?” Jashaun roared, attempting to shove Tasia out of his room.

Tasia just stood there like a massive block of resistant muscle, not budging. Just snickering at the fact she caught Jashaun dry humping a supposed drug dealer and gang member in exchange for a bag of

weed. She rolled her eyes and walked off, “Bye boy…”

“Bitch…” Jashaun huffed, slamming his door shut. Once Tasia made it inside her bedroom, she threw on some grey leggings, a tank top, grabbed her gym bag and a few dollars. She made it back out into the hallway, and heard Tahmir and Darnisha still arguing, this time louder.

“You sure you don’t need anything aunty?” Tasia asked once more, a huge fake smile written across her face.

“NO!” Darnisha spat as she rapidly rocked a colicky Khai.

“Ok, see ya’ll later!” And with that, Tasia made her way out the door.

“Be safe,” Tahmir responded.

~

Once Darnisha managed to put Khai to sleep, she needed some weed relief. Everything around her was changing rapidly and not for the better, but for the worse – at least that was the way she saw it. Tahmir having the upper hand was ruining her boss bitch come up dreams. After months of giving in into Tahmir, she was getting ready to reclaim her stake in the house. She just had to be very strategic about it. See – a few weeks after Tahmir started living with her, she quickly found out Tahmir had been somewhat playing her all along. Just like she thought she could use him, he was in reality using her, and he did enough due diligence on his end to know about the shady shit she was doing.

One night he confronted her and told her he knew she wasn’t on shit and all the money she was making wasn’t legit cash – but dollars she was making from running credit card and bank fraud scams with her crew of chicks. He told her if he was going to be with her, she was going to have to put an end to that shit or else he was going to run straight to the police and snitch. At first, she thought the nigga was just playing with her, that is until he whipped out some “receipts”, or proof of her stealing people’s credit card information, social security numbers and what not.

She was screwed. Her scandalous ass knew if Tahmir ran his mouth to the authorities, not only would she get locked up, but she’d spend some serious time in prison because by this point, she not only was defrauding credit card companies and banks out of tens of thousands of dollars, she was also running a scam on the government by misusing Tasia’s SSI money.

Tahmir finessed her ass, and she was nothing more than a transition plan for him. Don’t get it twisted though, he was enjoying every single inch of that pussy, and he loved having leverage over her

ass – making her cook, clean and do other housewife type shit. But her ass was definitely planning to get payback, plotting well-calculated moves to super-finesse his ass and reclaim her glory.

After they were done arguing, Tahmir left the house to go train a few clients at the gym he was working at Downtown. He managed to find a gym that would hire him despite him being a felon. Tasia was still out and about. It was now just her, Khai and Jashaun in the house, and in rare moments like this, Darnisha could go back to acting like her old, "normal" self.

The depressed, scheming mother stormed down the hallway of her apartment and made her way to her son's room. First she tried opening the bedroom door without knocking, but the door was locked. *KNOCK! KNOCK! KNOCK!* "Jashaun, open up da do, boy!"

Seconds later, Jashaun's door creaked open. "What, ma? I'm tired!"

"Yeah, 'cuz you been smokin' my loud! Where it at? AND RUN ME MY MONEY!"

Jashaun smacked his teeth, "Man, Tahmir not giving you enough money?!?" Jashaun sassed. Darnisha screwed her face up and punched Jashaun in his chest. "Boy! Don't play with me! RUN ME MY MONEY! How many dicks you sucked and fucked on so far this week?"

"Four…" Jashaun let his mother into his room. He walked over to his dresser, pulled out his earnings, and handed her the cash along with a bag of loud.

"Good – So you should be at what? Like $200 so far?"

"Somethin' like that…Why?" Jashaun handed his mother a stack of bills he made from selling his booty hole and mouth to guys in the neighborhood.

All this time, lo and fucking behold, Darnisha knew her son was prostituting himself. In fact, she was the one who was pimping him out to niggas. What a disgusting, desperate low life bitch. The young boy had been at it now for a good two years, getting started when he'd just turned 14. After she caught him kissing another boy years ago, she was disgusted and enraged at the idea of having a gay son. At one point, she thought about kicking him out the house. But when she realized how many undercover fags and DL niggas there were in the area, and how much she could make by possibly pimping her young son off to dudes, she secretly and slowly arranged for him to have sexual encounters with men in exchange for money.

She snatched the money out of Jashaun's hand and started counting the dollar bills, wanting to assure it was exactly $200, "Baby, I got a plan to get Tahmir's ass out my fuckin' house and get that sloppy bitch Tasia gone for good," she confessed, almost finishing her count. All the money was there. She stuffed the wad of cash in her bra and put her hands on her hips, "Where yo stupid ass sister at by the

way?"

"I don't know…" Jashaun scrunched his face up. He was so irritated with mother given she didn't even let him keep a single dollar from his trade.

"Ughhh! She ain't pickin' up her phone…But I had it with Tahmir's ass though. That nigga is tryin' to send her off to boot camp since she got arrested the other night for violating a curfew."

"He can't do that shit! He not even her father! Da fuck!?!?" Jashaun sucked his teeth and made his way to his desk. He sat down, pulled out a grape Swisher, cracked it open, dumped out the guts and stuffed it with weed. After he got done licking and rolling up the blunt, he lit it up, took three puffs, and passed it to his psychotic, exploitative so-called mother.

She snatched the perfectly rolled blunt from her prostitute son and employee's hand, slapped it in her mouth and then blew smoke out of her nostrils like a dragon. "I know! And that's why his ass need to go!"

"So what you gon' do?" Jashaun asked, rubbing his head filled with glistening waves he'd spend perfecting every day to look pretty and twink-like.

Darnisha handed her son the blunt, "Don't worry about it. Just know mama got a plan."

"Whatever you say…FYI, I think Tasia know what I'm doing." Jashaun confessed.

"Why?!? How!?!?" Darnisha suddenly became visibly upset.

"She just busted through my door not too long ago when that nigga Kevon was here."

"WHY IN THE FUCK DIDN'T YOU CLOSE AND LOCK YOUR DOOR?!?" Darnisha balled up her right fist, cocked it back, ready to punch Jashaun in his face, "NIGGA ARE YOU THAT STUPID?!? I TOLD YOU TO ALWAYS KEEP YO DO LOCKED IF YOU GON BE DOIN' THAT SHIT WHILE WE HERE! DUMB ASS!"

Before she could land a punch and pimp slap her boy-hoe and dreadfully her son, Khai's colicky cries echoed throughout the apartment, immediately grabbing Darnisha's attention. "UGHH! Now I gotta go deal wit yo ugly ass baby brother! GET IT TOGETHER!" Darnisha screamed, then made her way out the room.

Making her way back to the living room and to Khai's crib, she picked up Khai and rocked him back and forth. She muzzled the baby's mouth, "Ughh, just shut the fuck up. You ruinin' my plans too…"

Chapter Ten

"Mama! Please, no! I swear, I won't stay out no more, I promise!" Jasmine beseeched and begged her mother left and right to let her stay home and not get shipped off to boot camp. Two mean mugging, burly Cook County sheriffs were standing off to the side in the living room, ready to take Jasmine's wayward hood rat in training ass to a juvenile detention boot camp out in Elgin, the far northwest suburbs of the city.

"Baby, I'm sorry, but I gotta do this. You need help. This program will help you. You a danger to yourself." Darnisha fake cried, wiping tears off her face as she held Khai in other hand.

Jashaun was sitting down on a couch, sobbing his life away because he didn't want his twin sister to get shipped off to boot camp. The truth was after much contemplation, Darnisha came up with the best plan to get Tahmir and Tasia out of her life for good, and unfortunately Jasmine had to be sacrificed in order to fulfill her boss bitch come up dreams. She really didn't give a flying fuck about helping her daughter. Hell, up until this point, she was letting her fast ass protégé run wild in the streets. The reality was she sacrificed her daughter off to boot camp to play into whatever Tahmir had planned. She wanted to go along with his plan of getting Jasmine the right "intervention", that way she can show him she was trying to do right by him and everyone else in the house. It was all one big planned front to catch his ass by surprise.

"It's time to go. Do you have everything you need?" One of the sheriffs asked.

Jasmine didn't respond. She just uncontrollably wailed, slowly nodding her head yes and then proceeded to follow the Sheriffs out the door. Darnisha busted out crying like she was at the girl's funeral and her rose-covered casket was being lowered into the ground. Jashaun got up and hugged his mom as he too continued to sob. Shit was almost like the scene in Color Purple when Mista was trying to separate Nettie from Celie. Tahmir just stood there, looking unmoved. He didn't give a fuck because in his mind it was the right thing to do to stop Jasmine from going down the same path as her skank ass so-

called mother.

Once Jasmine was out the door and gone, Jashaun stormed to his room still crying. Darnisha sat down on the couch and continued to sob. Tasia who was off in the kitchen, watching everything go down, came into the living room and took Khai out of Darnisha's hands. Tahmir sat down next to Darnisha, trying his best to console her. "It's gon be alright baby, I promise. Trust me, she gon come back a changed girl," Tahmir tried assuring her.

Tasia, standing there, rocking Khai who ironically was never colicky anytime she held him, was thinking good fucking riddance. Jashaun's ass needed to be next, and she herself had a plan to expose Jashaun as a male prostitute…

~

"Come on, two more reps, you got it!" Tahmir was spotting Tasia on the incline bench machine in the gym, motivating and pushing her to squeeze out two more reps before re-racking the weight.

"AHHH! AHHH! AHHHH!" Tasia was fighting, but she managed to squeeze out two last reps at 135 pounds, heavy weight for a young girl.

"Damn, girl you getting stronger and stronger!" Tahmir praised her as he squeezed her biceps and shoulders, praising her increasingly chiseled physique.

"Unc, I got something to tell you…" Tasia was ready to spill the deets.

"Wassup?" Tahmir asked as he slapped some more weight on the incline bench bar, ready to start his set of reps.

"I know this gon' sound weird, but you really shouldn't be surprised at what I'm about to tell you. I just don't know how to say this…"

"What? Just say it…" Tahmir looked seriously at Tasia as he sat down and positioned his hands on the bar.

Tasia paused for a second. She just hoped what she was about to say wouldn't backfire. "A while back I caught Jashaun having sex in the living room…"

Tahmir let out a light chuckle as if he wasn't shocked. In his mind, what boy wouldn't fuck a broad in the living room of their parents' house?

"Shit, good then 'cuz I always thought that boy had a little sugar in his tank…" Tahmir laughed as he began lifting the weight off the rack and commenced his set of reps.

Tasia paused for a moment…"It wasn't a girl…"

Tahmir's stern brown eyes widened. He hesitated for a second with

the heavy bar still in his callused hands. Not wanting to drop the bar on himself, he re-racked it and then sat up. “Say what?”

“Yeah, no…It wasn’t a girl. It was a guy. Actually two guys. Two guys I know from school . These two young athletes – LaMarcus and Marshawn. Two basketball players. And then the other day he had some young nigga up in the house too and I peeped him giving him a lap dance in exchange for weed.”

“The fuck?!?! Are you fuckin’ kidding me right now?” Tahmir stood up, pissed like a hungry pitbull, ready to go back home and get to the bottom of these explosive ass allegations.

“I think he’s selling himself because when I saw them having sex in the living room, one of the guys gave him money afterwards. All this happened before you got out of prison,” Tasia confessed. She honestly didn’t know what Tahmir’s reaction was going to be.

Tahmir’s mouth dropped down to the floor. “Come, let’s go. We gon get to the bottom of this bullshit!”

Tasia stopped, “Wait, wait, wait a minute Tahmir. We can’t just go and confront him about it!

They gon know it was me!” Tasia complained, not wanting her to be identified as the snitch.

“Nah, fuck that! I had a suspicion his ass was up to no good!” Tahmir growled as he stormed out of the weight room.

“Unc! I got a better idea though. Please, just listen to me…”

“WHAT?!?” Tahmir growled.

Tasia nodded her head towards the basketball courts. “One of the guys, Marshawn, is in there right now. Go and confront him about it.”

“And say the fuck what to him?!? Ask him if he’s a fag and if he’s been fuckin’ Jashaun?”

“Nah..No. Go in there and tell him Jashaun said he raped him and you’re gonna call the police. He’ll probably tell you the truth right then and there.” Tasia was a smart ass girl, and she had this plan in the back of her pocket, ready to execute at any moment.

Tahmir paused for a second, thought about it, and huffed. “Let’s do it.”

The two then stormed towards the basketball courts. Marshawn was playing a pickup game with a few teens from the neighborhood. Without giving a flying fuck, Tahmir ran into the middle of the court, interrupting the rowdy teens’ game. “Which one?” Tahmir turned to Tasia, asking her to identify which one of the dudes was Marshawn. Tasia pointed towards buddy. Tahmir ran up on him, and grabbed Marshawn by his neck, “Come with me, fuck nigga…”

“Man, let me the fuck go, I’ll fuck yo ass up, old nigga!” Marshawn griped, ready to duke it out with the OG. Wrong move. Tahmir didn’t

take well to the threat. He cocked his fist and threw a pitiless punch in Marshawn's stomach, shushing his threat. Tasia trailed the two of them towards a spot behind the bleachers in the gym's basketball court.

Once behind one of the bleachers, Tahmir threw Marshawn up against a wall and wrapped his hands around his neck, "You raped my fuckin' stepson, nigga? Huh, nigga? Is it true?!?"

Marshawn looked over at Tasia with widened eyes, damn near about choke from Tahmir's grip around his trachea.

SLAP! Tahmir went across the boy's face, making him focus back on him and not Tasia. "Nah, nigga LOOK AT ME! Don't look at her! Answer my question or I'm gonna punch you so damn hard in your kidneys, you gon need dialysis every damn day!" Tahmir cocked his fist back again, ready to deliver another brutal blow to the fearful teen's side.

"Nah, man! I ain't raped him! We fucked! Me and my other homie LaMarcus. We paid him and he sucked our dicks and let us fuck…"

Tahmir went silent and let out a deep, heavy sigh mixed with a growl. "You tellin' me the truth?"

"Yeah…I swear to God man! I swear!" Marshawn blubbered, trembling at what Tahmir might do next.

"Good, you comin' with me then…"

"Nah man," Marshawn refused.

"NIGGA YOU COMIN' WITH ME NOW!" Tahmir cocked his fist and landed a blow in the boy's chest. Marshawn started to cough and cry, "Fine, bro."

~

Tahmir, Tasia and Marshawn rushed back to the apartment. As soon as they got there, Tahmir busted through the apartment door like he was a veteran member of Chicago's SWAT team, looking for El Chapo or Larry Hoover or some shit. Jashaun was on the couch playing on his cell phone as usual, fumbling through Facebook. Darnisha was in the kitchen, cooking what looked like spaghetti. Khai was in a playpen looking hungry as hell. Probably had a shitty diaper that needed to be changed.

With his hard grip around the back of Marshawn's neck, he marched him into the living room and then let him go. Then without warning, Tahmir's eyes landed on Jashaun. He stormed over to the couch, grabbed him and slammed him against the wall, "YOU OUT HERE FUCKIN' NIGGAS FOR MONEY!?!?!? THE FUCK IS WRONG WITH YOU!?!?"

Darnisha turned her attention towards the living room. She dashed

towards Tahmir, “What!?!? What you say!?!?” Once she saw Marshawn, who she knew was one of Jashaun’s “regulars”, she immediately knew the gig was up. The manipulative, lying mother then tried to play it off like she didn’t know.

“YEAH! YOU HEARD ME RIGHT! Your son is out here getting fucked by nasty niggas in the ass for MONEY! NIGGAS ARE TALKIN’ ABOUT IT IN THE STREETS! ASK THIS CLOWN ASS NIGGA RIGHT HERE!”

“Is it true? That’s the shit ya’ll on!?!? OH MY GOD!” Darnisha fake cried, and then acted like she was about to faint. Tasia dashed towards her psychotic aunt and stopped her from collapsing to the floor.

Jashaun, visibly shaken, began to let out crocodile tears. He didn’t say anything. He just stared at his enraged de facto stepfather, quivering, damn near about to piss his pants.

“Yo ass goin’ to fuckin’ boot camp too. Get ready…Yo ass goin’ next week!” Tahmir commanded, letting go of the boy. “Go to your fuckin’ room and stay yo ass in there until I say so. You ain’t goin’ no where till I get your ass shipped off too with your sister. I should’ve been did that.” Tahmir then turned his attention to Marshawn, “And as for your punk ass, get yo gay ass out of my house, and if I ever catch you around that gym, I’m letting all the guys know you a faggot ass nigga. NOW GET THE FUCK OUT MY HOUSE!”

Marshawn took heed to Tahmir’s instructions and warning and ran out of the apartment like a mouse getting chased by a cat. Tasia, still holding her aunt, was rejoicing on the inside. Mission fucking accomplished. Two down, one more evil bitch to go.

~

It was damn near midnight, and everyone in the house was asleep… except Darnisha. She was in the living room, smoking a square, watching a rerun of CSI Miami. Once she finished her cig, she got up, adjusted her lavender night robe, fixed her bonnet cap, and sauntered her way to Jashaun’s room. The door wasn’t locked, and she meandered her shady self right into her son’s dimly lit room. Jashaun, covered in blankets, was fast sleep. Darnisha rushed the bed, pulled the covers back and slapped the boy a few times, “Wake the fuck up,” Darnisha whispered in a low voice.

Jashaun slowly opened and wiped his eyes . “What, ma? Leave me alone. All this your fault,” he whispered in a sad-like tone as he sat up in his bed.

“What? My fault? If yo punk ass was more careful, you wouldn’t be in this predicament in the first place. But yo dumb ass don’t know how to conduct business the right way. Now you see what you done

got yo self into?" Darnisha exclaimed with her arms folded, her right foot tapping rapidly against the floor.

Jashaun remained silent. He didn't have a rebuttal. Not a single damn word.

"Exactly, you ain't got shit to say. But don't worry. The plan is going down in a few days, so just be ready."

"What's the plan?" Jashaun asked, anxious yet curious what his mother schemed up.

"Like I said, don't worry about it. Just stay yo dumb punk ass in your room."

"Ok…" he then laid sheepishly back down and pulled the covers over his head.

Darnisha exited the room, lightly chuckling under her dry Newport-infused breath. She got into the plush bed with Tahmir, his ass in a deep slumber. She cuddled him, stroked his flaccid meat, looking to get some midnight dick from her bae.

Chapter Eleven

"…Hold on for a sec, I gotta take this call…" Darnisha was sitting in the front passenger seat of an old beat up white Buick parked outside a Harold's Fried Chicken shack, smoking a blunt. Looking down at her phone, she didn't want to take the call, but she didn't want to come off as evasive. It was Tahmir calling her, probably wondering in the hell where her shady, manipulative ass was at.

Darnisha answered the phone, "Wassup, bae?" She rolled her eyes, somewhat annoyed as she took a puff and passed the blunt to the driver of the Buick.

"Where you at? I thought you said you'd be back in an hour? Shit you've been gone for almost two! You shouldn't have Khai out there like that this late at night." Tahmir chastised her, worried about her whereabouts, especially since she had Khai with her.

"Ughh, Tahmir. Calm that down. You trippin'. I told you I'm wit my cousin. He needed me to come babysit his son while he worked his shift. Just chill, dude" Darnisha lied.

"Well, I'm just sayin' though. I'm tryin' to fuck tonight. I got us some champagne and what not. We gotta celebrate now that I got the new gig down at East Bank…"

East Bank Club was one of Chicago's most premier fitness clubs. People who had a membership there were paying at least $500 a month, so you already know as a trainer, Tahmir was gonna be bringing in serious dollars.

"Bae, I promise, I'll be back soon. Just give me twenty more minutes," she lied again.

Tahmir exhaled, "Ok, bet. Don't keep me waiting."

"Ok," she pretended to show some empathy then hung up the phone.

"I can't believe you lettin' that hoe ass nigga run game on you like that. Usin' ass nigga," the driver of the car barked, passing the blunt to Darnisha.

"It's cool. His ass finne go soon. Him and my punk ass niece…" Darnisha took three huge puffs from the blunt, exhaled the smoke and then passed the half-smoked 'gar to her buddy. "Jaime, you sure you down for this? I don't need no flakes on my team…"

"You must've forgot who the fuck I am…" Jaime laughed, finishing

the blunt. He rolled down the window of the car, threw the roach out, and blew smoke from his nostrils. “You just better make sure the cash is right. Like I said, I need a down payment.”

Darnisha rumbled through her purse, pulled out an envelope, and handed it to Jaime. He opened it, quickly counting the bills. “All $2,000 in there?”

“Of course…” Darnisha assured him his down payment was all there in the manila envelope.

“So you wanna do this tonight, right?” He asked, looking ready to execute her plan.

“Yup…Once they’re both knocked out, I’m gonna hit your line, let you in, and then you can do your thing.”

“Bet.”

Darnisha held her hand out, signaling to her hired work she wanted to dap up. The two shook up, and then Darnisha got out the car, opened the backseat door, and took Khai, sleeping away in his car seat, out with her to get ready to hop in an Uber that was a good minute away.

Less than a minute later a black Mazda 6 zoomed up the street. It was Darnisha’s uber driver. Once she got Khai’s car seat situated in the back of the car, she hopped in and went back home, ready to begin phase one of the plan.

~

“Bae, I’m back!” Darnisha stumbled through the dark living room with Khai’s car seat in her hand. She marched down the hallway to her master bedroom. It was a Friday night, and to carry out her plan, the first thing she needed to do was ship Tasia’s ass off somewhere so she wouldn’t be here to witness what was about to go down. For once in her life, she played “good aunty” and convinced the girl she should go on a college tour to visit University of Miami. Darnisha even went as far to pay for the entire trip, organized by the school’s career counselor. Trips like this happened all the time, and when Tasia briefly mentioned it a while back, Darnisha saw it as an ample and perfect opportunity to get her niece out the house for the weekend.

Making her way into the bedroom, Darnisha took baby Khai out of the car seat, and put him in his crib. Darnisha noticed Tahmir was sound asleep, but she was about to wake his ass up to “celebrate” his new job.

“Tahmir! Baby! I’m back! I’m so sorry,” she fake apologized as she slipped out of her outfit and into her night robe. Tahmir woke up, “Hey…” he nonchalantly greeted, rubbing his eyes. He put a smile on his face, “I’m gonna go fix us some bubbly,” he said as he got out of

the bed and made his way to the fridge to go fix the both of them glasses of champagne.

"I know you said Jashaun is on punishment, but can he at least celebrate with us? At least have a glass before he goes off to bootcamp?" Darnisha politely asked.

Silence immersed the room as Tahmir thought about it for a moment. "Sure…" he agreed. "Oh, and don't worry babe, I'll go fix the champagne. I've been keeping you waiting all night. I apologize. Plus I got a surprise for you anyways, so just stay here, ok?"

"Sure…" Tahmir's eyes squeezed into curious slits. Something was off, he reasoned. His intuition was telling him this bitch was on some shady shit. She seemed too jumpy and excited, despite the fact it was damn near midnight and she was just bringing her ass into the house. Usually at this time of the night, her ass would've been in bed now. But this bitch was acting like she just downed a cranberry-flavored Red Bull. He suspected her ass was jumping on another nigga's dick, but he didn't care. Tahmir was fucking another woman, and had been doing so for months now.

Darnisha dashed out the room, made her way to Jashaun's room, and breezed in without knocking. "Wake up!" Darnisha slapped the boy-hoe awake.

Jashaun awakened and rubbed his eyes, "Wassup?" he said once he got a glimpse of his mama.

"Come in the living room. We finne drink champagne to celebrate Tahmir's new job." Darnisha commanded.

"Sooooo….When is the plan happening?" Jashaun inquired, hesitant to make a move out of his bed.

Darnisha growled. "Boy, just bring yo ass to the living room in a minute, ok, damn!!?!"

"Ok…" Jashaun grew a bit bothered and disappointed. He was so curious as to what her plan entailed, and felt so out of the loop that he was beginning not to believe her anymore.

Darnisha then made her way out to the living room, quickly rummaged through the cabinets and pulled out three champagne glasses. She opened the fridge, pulled out the bottle of champagne, popped it open and swiftly poured the gold liquid into all three glasses. Then she went into her night robe pocket, pulled out a bottle of her prescription lorazepam, which is a potent anti-anxiety medication that taken in high doses would knock a giraffe off it's feet. The crazy thing was, the pills were super-tiny, and one pill had the power to put down a NFL linebacker. She got the prescription from her doctor to help deal with her post-partum, and knowing she needed more to carry out her plan, she went back to the doctor and got a full bottle. She slipped about ten pills each into two of the champagne

glasses and stirred the pills until they fully dissolved.

Moments later, Jashaun and Tahmir emerged into the kitchen. Jashaun, looking nervous as hell, didn't say a word. Tahmir, although he wasn't really talking to Jashaun like that since he found out about his hoeing, looked nonchalant like a motherfucker. He had an inkling that something wasn't right, but he couldn't quite figure out what the fuck was happening.

Darnisha grabbed a glass, obviously the one not fixed with her toxic elixir, and held it up. "Come on, let's toast," she commanded, holding her glass in the air. Jashaun grabbed a glass, then reluctantly, Tahmir grabbed his. They clinked glasses together, "Cheers!" they said in low unison.

Darnisha gulped down her champagne like it was nothing then burped. Jashaun laughed, and did the same. Tahmir took cautious sips from the glass, but then he thought to himself, perhaps he was being too paranoid and was over thinking the entire situation. Quickly shaking off his suspicions, he gulped the rest of the champagne with ease and slapped his glass on the countertop.

~

An hour passed. Phase one of Darnisha's plan was complete. Jashaun, after taking down the champagne, went to his room and passed the fuck out. Tahmir was laid out on the couch as the flat screen TV blasted ESPN. Darnisha whipped out her cell phone and texted Jaime. "Let's go. They both knocked the fuck out."

Seconds later, a faint knock thumped the apartment front door. Darnisha, sitting on the couch adjacent from Tahmir, quickly jumped up and dashed towards the door. She quietly let the door open, "Anyone saw you?" she asked Jaime as she let him in.

He screwed his face, "Girl, of course not…" He rubbed his hands to warm them up, "Come on, let's do this. Where youngin' at?" he asked.

"In his room…Follow me," Darnisha then proceeded to walk down the hallway, Jaime trailing behind her.

Jaime was an old friend from the neighborhood who went to prison for sexual assault and rape some years ago. A towering, dark, burly, menacing figure, he stood at least seven feet tall, weighing nearly four hundred pounds. He was dark brown, had long dreadlocks and hands that looked like black cinderblocks.

Once near Jashaun's bedroom door, Darnisha pulled out a small Tupperware dish and handed it to Jaime. "Like I told you before, once you get done, make sure you stuff it in there deep. Make sure you rip him apart too, like make that shit very gruesome," Darnisha instructed.

“You got the other half of my money, right?” Jaime asked with a raised brow.

“Here…” She pulled out another envelope and handed it to him. Then she opened Jashaun’s bedroom door, and the both of them walked in and approached Jashaun as he laid there in deep slumber.

“Try to be done ASAP.” Darnisha smiled and handed Jaime a Magnum condom. The psychotic and deranged mother, wanting to make sure the next phase of the plan was to be done right, stood there off to the side and observed everything that was about to happen next. Jaime pulled down his pants and underwear, exposing his long dark brown flaccid penis to the damp cool air circulating in the room. With two pills of Viagra, weed, and henny running through his system, he only needed a second to get to a massively engorged eleven inch erection. He used his teeth to tear open the gold condom wrapper, and then proceeded to wrap the rubber down his veiny, pulsating shaft. He then leaned down into the bed, grabbed Jashaun’s waist, pulled down his pants, exposing the boy’s ass. Darnisha, having so much anxiety running through her system, for a split second couldn’t believe she’d actually gone to great lengths to hire a convicted violent serial rapist to do this to her only son, but it had to be done to get Tahmir off her back for good.

Without hesitation, not even bothering to lube the boy’s bottom, Jaime inserted himself into the boy and began ferociously pounding away. Despite Jashaun being knocked out from the pills, he still managed to throw up some resistance against what was happening to him. But his struggling was weak and limber as Jaime’s wide and dark bodyweight overpowered the boy. Small moans of pain creaked from Jashaun’s dry mouth. Darnisha looked at his face and she could tell he was probably having an intense nightmare based on the weird, cringed facial expressions he was making even with his eyes closed.

After about a good five minutes, Jaime pulled out. Darnisha almost wanted to gag seeing all the blood that covered the bed and even Jaime’s crotch. She numbed herself, blocking out the blood imagery, and signaled to Jaime to open up the Tupperware bowl. A few days ago, when she had sex with Tahmir, she wanted him to cum in her. Fulfilling her wish, he did just that, busting the biggest load up in her. Once they’d finished fucking, she went to the bathroom, and queefed out his gooey seed into a Tupperware bowl. She kept it hidden in the back of the fridge until this very moment.

Jaime opened up the Tupperware, poured semen over his hardened, bloodied, condom covered penis and reinserted himself back into the boy’s inside. The goal was to push as much of the semen inside of Jashaun’s ass. Once he was done, Darnisha threw him a towel and a garbage back so he could clean himself up and then

dispose of the condom, the Tupperware and other items of potential evidence.

Once finished, he pulled his underwear and pants up, and exited the room. Jashaun, still passed out from being heavily intoxicated, was laid out in the bed with his legs partly spread open, virtually motionless in a pool of blood. Darnisha had a turkey baser on top of Jashaun's dresser. She walked over, grabbed it and without shame, she sucked up some of the blood from the growing crimson pool. Once she figured she had enough blood lapped up in the baser, she made her way down into the living room to see if Tahmir was still passed out. With Jaime following right behind her, she was feeling more and more confident her plan was perfectly executed seeing how Tahmir wasn't even flinching in his intense slumber. Darnisha dapped up with Jaime, then opened the apartment door and let him out.

She walked over to Tahmir who was slumped on the couch, pulled down his gym pants and boxers and squeezed out Jashaun's blood all over Tahmir's crotch area. Once she had enough blood splattered all over his lower half, the psycho bitch made her way back to her bedroom to check up on Khai. The baby was in a deep sleep as well. Thank God for NyQuil – adult strength that is. Hours earlier, she gave him a bottle with more NyQuil in it to put down Professor Klump. Showtime, she thought to herself. She took Khai out of his crib, laid him down on the bed, face up. She paused for a moment, gulped, and then took one of the bed pillows and began to suffocate the infant until she saw his limbs turn blue. She removed the pillow and checked his pulse. "Perfect," she mumbled under her shady, murderous breath.

"AHHH! AHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHH! NO! NOOO! NO! NOOOO!" Suddenly she screamed as loudest as she could. She whipped out her cell phone and dialed 9-11.

"9-11 – What's your emergency?" The flat-tone sounding operator asked.

"MY BOYFRIEND RAPED MY SON AND KILLED MY BABY! NOOO! NO!! PLEASE SOMEONE HELP ME!"

Chapter Twelve

Miami was a complete mind-blowing experience for Ms. Tasia. This was the first time ever in her life that she had the opportunity to travel to a different city, let alone a different state. She spent all her life growing up in the slums of Chicago and now here she was, having the best time of her life in luminous Miami, soaking up the unforgiving heat and humidity. She spent the last two days down here, touring the University of Miami's campus – the place she knew she wanted to be within the next two years.

Rays of sunshine sparkled through the Ramada Inn hotel room Tasia was sharing with a few other students from different high schools in Chicago. Marcia, a half black and Mexican girl from the Southwest side of the city became her trip bestie, and the way the two were bonding, it was almost certain they were going to link back up in Chicago and become really good friends. They had so much in common – their love of Bruno Mars, they both were avid fans of Octavia Butler's books, and they both wanted to be lawyers.

As the two girls chopped it up, talking about random shit, Tasia's phone buzzed in her pants pocket, catching her attention. She pulled it out and saw Darnisha's number run across the iPhone screen. She groaned and rolled her eyes, "My aunt's calling me. Let me see what her ignorant ass wants…"

Marcia laughed, "Ok sis…"

Tasia sauntered her way to the bathroom to seek some privacy. Once inside, she answered the phone, "Yes, Aunty…"

Sitting by herself in a police station, Darnisha was sniffling and crying, pretending to squeeze out words through the phone, "Ttt-ttt-tasia…I gggg-gg-ggggot some bbbbad news," she stammered.

Suddenly Tasia's anxiety went from zero to a hundred in a second. Butterflies swarmed her stomach. This was the first time ever she heard her aunt cry. She could feel something terrible happened and she swiftly tried to prepare herself psychologically for what her aunt was about to say.

Darnisha continued to fake cry and sniffled through the phone.

"Aunty, what happened?!?" Tasia asked as more fear invaded her

voice.

“Tahmir hurt Jashaun pretty bad…And your c-cc-cousin Khai… He’s dead. Tahmir suffocated him!” Darnisha lied.

“What?!? Huh!?! What happened!?” Tasia screamed as her eyes got super-watery at hearing the horrid news. None of this was making any sense, and she automatically knew her Aunt did something, because she couldn’t understand how or why Tahmir would hurt Jashaun, let alone kill Khai.

“No, no, no….Tell me the truth, bitch! What happened! Did you do something to them?!?” Tasia cried. “What did Tahmir do to Jashaun?!?”

“Wh-whh-what?!? What do you mean what did I do? Why would you think I did anything?” Darnisha attempted her best to play off that she had any involvement in what happened last night.

“WHAT DID TAHMIR DO TO JASHAUN!” Tasia roared. Her darkened shout traveled into the rest of the hotel room. Seconds later someone knocked on the door. “Tasia, is everything ok?” one of her roommates asked.

“Yes, just leave me alone for a second, I have a family emergency,” Tasia responded. “Aunty, answer my question…”

Darnisha let out opera-esque wails, “He raped him! Tasia, he raped him!”

“Aunty, I don’t believe it! I don’t believe not one bit! Why would he rape Jashaun?!?!”

“Tasia, the police have proof. They have sperm samples. They matched Tahmir’s DNA to sperm found inside of Jashaun.”

Tasia stood silent. Her mouth dropped in surprise by her aunt’s last statement. The police had ample proof and evidence that Tahmir raped Jashaun. None of this shit was making any sense. She just told Tahmir not too long ago about all the shit Jashaun was doing, and based on his reaction, it just seemed so out of character for him to have this desire to sodomize Jashaun, especially since he was ready to ship his ass off to boot camp with Jasmine.

Tasia just shook her head in utter disbelief. “Aunty, are you serious? This can’t be real, please, tell me this is just a big ass joke you are playing on me!”

“No…I wish it was. But it’s not…I’m s-sss-ssorry Tasia. I wish it was a joke too. I know I h-hhaven’t been the best person to you, but you gotta believe me on this one, baby doll,” Darnisha cried and stuttered. Man, this evil bitch was putting on the best show, and if this bitch was an actress she would’ve won an Oscar for this breathtaking, fake ass performance.

Tasia was wrestling so hard with trying to digest the dreadful news. She collapsed to the bathroom floor, crawled near the sink and

sobbed. Her world was just turned upside down, and she didn't even know how she was going to make it her damn self.

~

A week later…

"The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want," an old chubby Pastor somberly recited Psalm 23 as three Hispanic cemetery workers prepared Khai's baby blue casket to be lowered into the grave.

An overcast, cloudy dreariness clothed the army of dark gray clouds permeating the sky's expanse, not allowing a single ray of sun to offer an inch of glimmer under the popped up green cemetery tent.

"Noooo! Noooo, my baby Khai! Please, don't go! Don't go! PLEASE!" Darnisha howled as she stood up from her seat, moved closer to the casket and kneeled down. She placed her right hand on the casket as it slowly lowered into the grave.

Jasmine, who was temporarily let out of boot camp to attend the funeral, stood up as well and got down near the casket and hugged her so-called mourning mother. As she held her, she kind of tugged her away to prevent her from falling into the deep muddy grave. The two embraced each other hard as their screeching sobs intensified.

Despite not liking these two wicked and reprehensible bitches, hearing their deep wailing was beginning to pull on Tasia's heart and conscience. She couldn't believe her baby cousin was murdered for no reason, and that Tahmir would even do such an insane thing. Still so dumb in disbelief, she had the urge to breakdown and cry, but she did her best to hold on and be strong.

Jashaun wasn't at the funeral. Unfortunately, he was in critical condition at a hospital, recovering from a massive loss of blood. He lost so much blood, the doctors believe he possibly sustained slight brain damage. He had been placed in a medically induced coma for the time being and the doctors told Darnisha and Tasia it was going to be some time before they took him out of it to assess the possibility of brain damage.

After Darnisha called 9-11 that night, the police swarmed the apartment, arrested Tahmir and he was being held in a maximum security cell at Cook County Jail, awaiting his arraignment. After Tasia came back from Miami, she attempted to get into contact with Tahmir at the jail only to be told she couldn't since she was a minor. She'd needed to go through an adult. Obviously that would've been Darnisha. But since Tasia still had this burning inkling Tahmir wasn't involved in the alleged rape of Jashaun nor did he kill Khai, she was desperate to get his side of the story to put two and two together.

"He maketh me to lie down in green pastures, he leadeth me

besides still waters. He restoreth my soul." The Pastor continued to murmur in his deep, heavy voice, slightly cracking at the end of every word.

"My baby, noooooooo! Ahhhh, please, God whyyyyy! Why God!" Darnisha screamed as the casket sojourned almost halfway into its grave.

One of the funeral home directors handed Tasia a handkerchief so she could wipe the tears streaming down her brown cheeks away. As she wiped the tears from her face, the same funeral home director looked at Tasia and then gestured her head over to Darnisha and Jasmine as they rocked back and forth on their knees with their eyes set on the casket that was now firmly planted into the ground. Tasia guessed that was the funeral home director's way of telling her she needed to console her family.

Tasia took a deep breath and slowly moved closer to them so she could console them. As she kneeled into their presence, she wrapped her arms around them and slowly lifted them up and walked them back to the dark green draped seats beside the grave.

"Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil: for thou art with me; they rod and they staff they comfort me."

With Tasia in the middle chair, Darnisha and Jasmine sat on her opposite sides, each resting their heavy heads on her now broad, muscular shoulders. Tasia handed Jasmine the tear-soaked handkerchief so she too could wipe her eyes. Although Jasmine's salty tears still streamed down her face, ruining her makeup, she was more calm and collect than Darnisha.

As the Reverend finished reciting the Lord's Prayer and ended the service, Tasia slowly lifted her grieving relatives up and walked them over to the long beige Lincoln Towncar limousine. "Everything's gonna be fine. We're gonna make it. We're gonna make it…" Tasia said to the both of them as they approached the limo's opened doors. The driver who was standing near the women helped them in and took off to the church for a repast.

~

A few days later…

Now that Tahmir was locked up, Jasmine back in boot camp, Jashaun still in the hospital, Tasia and Darnisha found themselves strangely being cordial roommates – at least for the time being. It was a cold, typically Chi-city windy Thursday evening. Darnisha, driven to "clean" house, occupied herself with trying to rid the apartment of all of Tahmir's belongings. Tasia was in her room, on her laptop, writing

a long letter to Tahmir. She figured since she couldn't visit him in person, the next possible and logical thing to do in order to get into contact with him was to send him a letter. Tasia figured since she wanted to be a lawyer when she gets older, she saw this as the perfect opportunity to put some of her self-taught legal defense skills to use and figure out a way to get Tahmir out of jail.

Using the best of her knowledge, Wikipedia and other shit she could find on the internet, she devised this "defense" plan to get Tahmir out of jail. The first step was to thoroughly research his charges. He had been charged with one count of first degree murder, one count of criminal child neglect, one count of sexual assault, and a list of other accessory crimes. Given that Tahmir was just released from prison not too long ago and was on probation, if convicted his ass was going to serve life in prison without the possibility of parole. Tasia knew her "uncle" was gonna have the book thrown at him, so she needed to act quick and decisively to see if she could somehow save him.

Tasia knew Tahmir wasn't eligible for any type of bail, so her next move was to find a good criminal defense attorney for Tahmir. She didn't have a damn dime in her name, but while she was in Miami, touring the law school's campus, she learned from one of the professors on the tour that law schools usually offer public defender services to at-risk teens, poor people and others who can't afford expensive attorneys.

As she typed away, she told Tahmir everything she was going to do to help him get out of jail, and that she had faith in him and didn't believe for a second that he was guilty. Once she was done, she printed out the letter, stuck it in an envelope addressed to Tahmir's designated jail PO box. She threw on her jacket, grabbed her gym bag, and made her way down the hallway and out of the apartment. Passing the kitchen, she saw Darnisha standing near the apartment's utility closet with a huge garbage bag, throwing away all of Tahmir's jackets and shoes.

"Hey Aunty, I'm going to the gym. You need me to get anything?" Tasia asked in a fake nice good and obedient daughter tone.

Darnisha stopped her OCD-like cleaning and turned around, looking dead at Tasia with a raised brow infused in her yellow face..."Yeah, bring me back a box of black garbage bags and some Pinesol."

"Got it. I should be back in like two hours." Tasia assured her, making her way to the door.

"Bye…" Darnisha didn't even look as the girl exited the apartment. She just dived right back into the closet, throwing jackets, shoes, and other pieces of Tahmir's clothing all over the place like she was a

strung out crackho looking for a missing bag of rocks.

Chapter Thirteen

The Adams Street bus came to a complete stop at the Illinois Institute of Technology's Kent Law School, right in the heart of Downtown Chicago. Tasia lied to Darnisha and told her she was going to hang out with her friend Marcia over in Hyde Park, but the two had met up to go to an afternoon appointment with Mr. Liebowitz, a part-time criminal defense attorney with the law school's nonprofit legal clinic. Tasia read all up on Mr. Liebowitz, deciding he was going to be the best attorney she could get, hopefully for free. He used to be one of the top criminal defense attorneys in Illinois, actually the whole damn country. After retiring, he became a staff attorney for the legal nonprofit. He worked on multiple "innocence" projects, where he helped those who were wrongfully accused get out of prison.

"Do you think he's going to really help your uncle?" Marcia asked as the two of them quickly paced their way to the front entrance of the law school. "I don't know, but all I can do is hope, pray and make the impossible become possible…All I know is he's tried so many cases similar to Tahmir's. So many black men accused of rape by white women back in the 60's and the 70s and then they end up getting out because of forced confessions and fucked up evidence used by prosecutors. The criminal justice system is a joke in this country."

"Yeah, but I don't know Tasia. If they got sperm and blood samples, how in the hell are you gonna prove otherwise? I mean, I don't want to be negative, but that's pretty convincing evidence. Why are you so sure?"

"Listen, I don't know. I mean, I could be wrong…" Tasia paused for a moment, almost wanting to bust out and cry. "But trust me when I tell you. This psycho bitch aunt of mines, she's a fucking loser, and a scamming ass bitch. There's no telling what she would do to get Tahmir out the house. Shit, truth be told, I need to watch my fucking back too because I bet you she's planning something on me too."

Marcia reached in and hugged Tasia, "Listen girl, I believe you. I just don't want you to get your hopes up. We all know how fucked up this system is. I'm there for you. I'm gonna help you too, friend."

Marcia wiped the tears off Tasia's face and smiled, "I just love how

aggressive you are. You're gonna make such a good lawyer one day. Shit, if I ever get in trouble, I'm gonna pay you a million dollars to help me!"

Tasia chuckled, "I won't charge you."

The two hugged again and then walked through the entrance of the law school. A short, older black female security guard twiddled her short gray twists as she scanned the two girls up and down. "How ya'll doin'? Ya'll here for an appointment?"

"Yes ma'am," Tasia replied. "We're here to see Mr. Liebowitz."

"Let me see your IDs…Also, print and sign your names in this logbook," the security guard opened up a blue three ring binder. The girls whipped out their IDs, and handed them to the security guard. They then signed their names in the logbook, and made their way to the elevators. Tasia exhaled, "Please God…Please…I'm asking you please help us," she prayed as the ambitious pair walked into the elevator.

~

The two girls sat quietly, staring down Mr. Liebowitz as he fumbled through a binder of paperwork work that gave a detailed summary of the charges against Tahmir. Mr. Liebowitz was an older white Jewish man, with a head full of dark brown curly hair and a huge nose that looked you could sit a bird's nest on top of it. Without saying a word, he jotted down notes and would occasionally nod his head and groan, giving Tasia the illusion he was working out the case in his head.

After a few moments passed, he closed the binder, raised his thick bushy brow, took a deep breath and exhaled. "Well, this is going to be difficult, Ms. Johnson. The State has a lot of damning evidence against your uncle."

"I know, I'm very aware of that sir, but you gotta understand. This just isn't him. He isn't the type to do this. It doesn't make any sense at all." Tasia pleaded, trying her best to persuade the seemingly reluctant attorney that her "uncle" was innocent of all charges.

"I hate to break it to you Tasia, but plenty of people who seem 'normal' do crazy things all the time. That's the beauty and danger of humanity. We don't truly know what people are capable of. I'm sorry, but I don't think I can commit to this case."

With tears forming in her eyes, Tasia lowered her head, and her body quivered in angst hearing a reaction she didn't want to accept.

"Ms. Johnson, I really would like to help you, but you have to understand, we are a nonprofit. We have a very limited budget. The cases we take on require us to have crystal clear proof that our clients are more than likely innocent. In your uncle's case, the State has

enough DNA evidence to convict him a thousand times over. The only other recommendation I can give you is to actually hire a criminal defense attorney. For the right price, they'll take any case and argue it to the best of their abilities."

"I know Mr. Liebowitz. I know I could've hired an attorney. But that's the thing; I don't have the money to hire one. I'm a struggling high school student raised by an emotionally unstable and abusive aunt."

Mr. Liebowitz paused for a moment. "So, this aunt…You said she used to abuse you. And you also think she framed your uncle? Why would she do that? Why go through all of this just to get a man out of her house?"

Tasia didn't have a real explanation to give him other than to detail her experiences living with her aunt and how she neglected her up until Tahmir moved in. After she did her best to give an account of every horrid experience her aunt put her through, the reluctant attorney rubbed the sides of his temple, looking like he wanted to cry his damn self.

"I'm so sorry to hear all of this Ms. Johnson. She sounds like a horrible person, and if I were in your shoes, I'd be trying to get her put in jail. But as for your uncle, his case seems almost indefensible."

Tasia suddenly scrunched her face up and wailed. Marcia reached over, hugged her friend and rubbed her back, doing her best to console Tasia.

Mr. Liebowitz tapped his pen against the table. "Look, I tell you what. You seem like a good girl. You do this for me and I will help you as much as I can. You need to go back home, take some time to yourself. Once you're recharged, if you're serious about this, you need to really need to hone in your Law & Order Detective skills and try to find something around that apartment that could implicate your aunt in this cover up…That's if one exists. You need to hurry though, because Tahmir's arraignment is in a few days. If the legal clinic decides to take him in as a client, I need to bring them some serious evidence. Can you do that for me?"

Tasia raised her head, wiped her face, and smiled, "Thank you, Mr. Liebowitz. I'll try. I promise I'll try."

The gregarious attorney stood up, and extended his hand to shake Tasia's. They shook hands, and then the two girls made their way out of his office. Tasia and her BFF hung out for a few more hours at a Chipotle nearby, had lunch, and talked about what she was going to do next to crack this Antarctica cold case. Tasia had no idea what in the hell she was going to even look for, but she had to turn shit up ASAP, otherwise her uncle, mentor and savior was going to be locked away for good and she'd never see him again.

~

“Where you been at? Damn, I’ve been trying to call you all damn day!” Darnisha barked, sitting on the living room couch, puffing a Newport, with the TV blaring a rerun of Judge Judy in the background. Tasia just walked in and was hit by her aunt’s stern question. She could hear by the drift of her raspy voice her aunt was for sure and slowly reclaiming her old scammerific hood bogger self now that Tahmir and Khai were out the picture. As for Jasmine, Darnisha decided to keep her ass locked up in boot camp until she turned 18. Jashaun was still in a coma. It was now going to be a race against time. If Tasia couldn’t find any smoking gun evidence implicating this heinous manipulative bitch, once Tahmir got a life sentence thrown at him, she knew shit was going to get REALLY real.

“Sorry, aunty. Marcia and I were helping each other out with our SAT prep classes. I would’ve hit you back but my phone died.” She pulled out her phone showing her the phone was dead, “See.”

“Well, I’ve been calling you because Mrs. Watkins from DCFS is coming back on Tuesday to interview me again and I need to get this house really clean. We need to clean this shit up ASAP because I can’t stay here no more. I need that voucher to get the fuck up out of here. So, you not going to school on Tuesday ‘cuz you need to help me, ok?”

“Aunty, I can’t. The admissions rep from UM is coming to the school on Tuesday. I can’t reschedule that.” Tasia protested.

Darnisha scrunched her face up. She stood up and lunged towards Tasia, ready to slap the shit out of the girl, but her rebellious niece was unfazed. “Really? That’s the shit you on? You really think you gon whoop my ass?” Tasia warned her with her arms folded as she scanned the no good, barely put together crazy bitch up and down.

“Bitch, you really tryin’ me. I was tryin’ to be nice to yo ass, but you really testing my limits.”

Tasia didn’t say anything. She looked the other way and rolled her eyes. “Fine, I’ll be here on Tuesday. I’m only doing this ‘cuz I know you got ‘plans’. But just know, just like how you got plans, I got plans, and you not gon stomp on my dreams.”

Darnisha fake smirked, “Agreed. You scratch my back, I’ll scratch yours.”

Tasia fake smiled back at her, “Thanks, aunty. You’re the best.”

With that, Tasia sashayed off to her room. Taking the advice of Mr. Liebowitz, she laid in her bed, closed her eyes, and meditated. She needed to clear her mind. Rid herself of all negative thoughts. Make the impossible become impossible. She was gonna get her uncle free. The clues she needed were in the house. She knew they were there. They had to be. Darnisha wasn’t that smart to commit the perfect

crime of the century. She just needed the faith and zeal to find it. She was gonna find it. Hopefully, sooner rather than later.

~

"This dick feel good to you, baby?" Ryann was sliding in and out of Darnisha's creamy coochie, making her splash pussy juice all over her purple satin sheets.

Ryann was wheezing in her ear while giving long, pulsating strokes inside Darnisha's gooey pink middle. With her newfound bae on top of her, missionary style, Darnisha's thick yellow legs spread across the plush king-sized bed, allowing for deeper and more intense penetration, touching that secret spot that will send a bitch to heaven and meet King Jesus.

Ryann wasn't playing with the dick down either. This nigga had Darnisha's arms above her head, and to keep her from fighting the dick, Ryann's fingers were intertwined with Darnisha's, giving the ratchet bitch lethal strokes that, with a slow rhythm, reached the bottom of her hollow, worn out pussy cave.

"Bitch, don't fight the dick. Don't fight it! Don't fight me. Fight the courts. Fight these crackas, but don't fight me!" Ryann growled, pushing deeper and deeper into Darnisha, damn near ripping her uterus apart.

"Yess, yess, yess, baby, fufff-ffuck this pussy," Darnisha cried, her eyes rolling in the back of her head. If this bitch was foaming at the mouth, you would've thought she was having an epileptic seizure or some shit.

"I-I-III'm coming, fuck me zaddy!" Darnisha screamed, squirting nookie juice all up in the air. This was the first time Darnisha came like that. Her juices damn near touched the ceiling of the apartment. You would've thought yo ass was in Yellowstone National Park, watching the Old Faithful geyser shoot off into the blue Wyoming sky.

Ryann pulled out of Darnisha, took off the strap on, and licked the dildo up and down. "I love the way yo pussy taste girl, now come eat me the fuck out."

And just like that Ryann rolled on her back next to her bae. Darnisha got up and positioned herself in between Ryann's legs. Darnisha had been secretly fucking around with Ryann for a hot minute now. The butch ass bitch was a tattoo artist and a lowkey drug dealer who met Darnisha at a weave shop up in Chatham. The two flirted with each other, exchanged numbers and had been fucking around with each other ever since – even when Darnisha was still fucking around with Tahmir, and even when she was pregnant. Yup… Trifling…

Darnisha wrapped her long lips around Ryann's pulsating clit and began munching away, ferociously eating that big meaty pink prawn. She stuffed two fingers inside the butch's cooch, quickly located her g-spot, and within seconds had the chick cumming back to back. Shit, the way Darnisha was eating that twat, you would've thought this hoe had a PhD in pussy-eatinology from the University of Nasty THOTifornia.

Once the two finished pounding out each other's pussies, they laid side by side, cuddled up, fondling each other's titties as cool air from the ceiling fan hardened their nipples.

"So when you give that Keisha Knight Pulliam knock off bitch the boot? We can handle her ass ASAP," Ryann inquired as she landed wet kisses up and down Darnisha's neck.

"Soon, I just gotta work on some other things. The more I think about it, the more I gotta be careful with Tasia's black greasy ass. Bruh, it's fucked up 'cuz a part of me thinks this bitch kind of got an up on me. But for right now, I'm tryna be out this apartment in a month. I got the social worker coming over on Tuesday."

"Cool…Well, hopefully now that I helped you get that job at Target, it'll look good to her. Jasmine is in boot camp. And since that crazy nigga raped Jashaun and killed Khai, she'll have no other choice but to feel sorry for you."

"Well, we'll see…" Darnisha huffed and quivered as she enjoyed the kisses planted up and down her neck.

"You wanna go for round two?" Darnisha asked, ready to get her pussy worked on again.

"Sure, why not?" Ryann got up, strapped on the dildo and lubed it up. "Let me get in that ass though. Toot that thang up, bitch!" the butch lover demanded. Darnisha, following the seductive decree, got on her knees, turned around and spread her big flower tattoo-covered ass open ready for Ryann to work that tight booty hole. "Take it easy on me. Don't be on no Jaime shit," Darnisha laughed.

Chapter Fourteen

“…Said little bitch, you can't fuck with me
If you wanted to
These expensive, these is red bottoms
These is bloody shoes
Hit the store, I can get 'em both
I don't wanna choose
And I'm quick, cut a nigga hustle
Don't get comfortable
Look, I don't dance now
I make money moves
Say I don't gotta dance
I make money move
If I see you and I don't speak
That means I don't fuck with you
I'm a boss, you a worker bitch
I make bloody moves…”

Up until now Darnisha was never a successful multitasker. But this Monday evening, this money motivated whore was in the living room of her apartment, listening to Cardi B’s “Bodak Yellow”, doing her best to vacuum the entire living room carpet, dust all the appliances and furniture and clean the baseboards. With the biggest grin plastered on her face, the ratchet bitch anthem echoed throughout the entire apartment, driving Tasia crazy. She absolutely hated that song and didn’t see why women were so addicted to listening to that bullshit.

In her room, trying to tidy up as well, she had her mind focused on trying to find any evidence that could possibly suggest Tahmir didn’t kill Khai nor rape Jashaun. After she got done cleaning up her room, she moved onto to Jasmine’s and worked effortlessly to get the room cleaned up. She didn’t have to do much since Jasmine had not been home in months now and was already somewhat clean before she left. Once she was done in there, she marched down the hallway, and stood there for a second, observing for the first time ever her aunt engaged in serious deep house cleaning. Tasia just shook her head. She was doing the most – all over a fucking voucher to finally get her meal ticket up out of the projects.

“Aunty, I’m done with Jasmine’s room. What you need me to do

next?" Tasia politely questioned. She was ready to be done with this shit so she could get back to strategizing on Tahmir's case. She needed to find something ASAP. Tahmir's arraignment was coming up this Friday. The only thing she could think of to possibly delay the arraignment was to have Mr. Liebowitz file a motion to delay the hearing. But she didn't want to explore that possibility, so she had to find something. Every night she prayed hard that God would give her a sign. Something.

"Go hit up Jashaun's room. I need his shit SPOTLESS!" Darnisha was now on the ground, jiggling her ass to the thunderous, bass heavy beat as she poured laser-like focus into wiping down the baseboards.

Boom! Eurkea. There it was. Tasia felt so stupid. Why didn't she think of this shit earlier? Jashaun's room was the crime scene. If there was something in there that would hint to a cover up, it would be in Jashaun's room. Quickly making her way back down the hallway, she strolled into Jashaun's room, closed the door and locked it. She didn't want her aunt to possibly interrupt her.

She scanned the room, looking for anything that might stand out. She dashed towards his dresser and opened up every single drawer, rumbling through his clothes. Pulling out each individual drawer, one by one, she didn't find shit. Just nothing but folded up boxers, t-shirts, and a few pieces of lingerie. "What the fuck?" she gasped, pulling out a thong. She shook her head and quickly threw the thong back into the drawer.

Making her way down to the final drawer, she opened it up. Balls of socks filled the dresser. She ran her hand through the bottom of the dresser and felt a long object. She pulled it out. It was a black dildo. "Ewww," she gasped in disgust, dropping the black 13-inch dildo back into the dresser. "Ughhhh! The fuck!?!?" she whimpered.

She swiftly scanned the room again. Her eyes glued themselves to the closet. She dashed over to it, opened it up, and scurried through empty shoe boxes on the top shelf and a few more boxes on the bottom. Nothing but shirts and pants hung on plastic hangers. Tasia closed the closet door then stumbled over to his compute desk. She ran her fingers against the closed laptop and couldn't think of anything else. Then her eyes gazed over to a black webcam sitting off to the side. She thought about it for a few seconds…Why in the fuck did he have a webcam, she wondered, scratching her head out of curiosity.

Tasia opened the laptop and powered it on. Luckily, a password wasn't required for her to login. Once she had access to the desktop, she opened his web browser and looked at his search history. He was a frequent visitor of a bunch of porn websites – most of them gay-oriented. She came across one website she didn't immediately

recognize as a porn website – "*www.chaturbate.com*."

Clicking on the hyperlink led to her to a sex webcam site. All she saw were thumbnails of people doing all types of sexual acts live. Once she realized that the site allowed people to make money by performing sexual acts in front of random viewers, she had the sudden epiphany that Jashaun was cyber-pimping himself out to people.

She closed out of the website, shaking her head in disgust. Jashaun was really deep into this shit, and Tasia grew curious to wonder if Darnisha knew about this shit too.

She then went through various folders on his desktop and came across a folder of videos. It looked like the Webcam had a setting where every time Jashaun would turn on the webcam it would automatically record him. Tasia clicked one of the videos. Within seconds, she saw Jashaun naked, staring into the webcam, jacking off. Tasia quickly clicked off the video. She presumed most, if not all the video files were going to be of him engaged in for-pay self-pleasure. All of a sudden she had another light bulb moment – she wondered if anything had been recorded the night the rape allegedly occurred.

As she went down the list of video files, her anxiety amped up once her eyes recognized a video file from that uneventful day and possibly night. The file was unusually long – about a good eight hours, which meant the webcam had been recording for a lengthy period of time. She opened it up and zoomed past all the sexual acts that had been recorded until she finally got to a part where Jashaun was sleeping. She then observed Darnisha storming into the room, talking to Jashaun. The young detective paused the video, grabbed a pair of Beats By Dre earphones on the desk and plugged them in to see if audio had been recorded too. She played the video. Voila. There was audio…

Tasia watched her aunt slap Jashaun awake, "Wake up!"

Jashaun awakened and rubbed his eyes, "Wassup?"

"Come in the living room. We finne drink champagne to celebrate Tahmir's new job." Darnisha ordered.

"Sooooo….When is the plan happening?" Jashaun inquired as he still lay in the bed.

Darnisha growled. "Boy, just bring yo ass to the living room in a minute, ok, damn!!?!"

"Ok…" Jashaun mumbled. Tasia could tell he looked a bit bothered. A few seconds passed, he got out the bed and left the room. About an hour later, Tasia watched him stumble into the room as if he was super-high or super-drunk, or shit, could've been a combination of both. Jashaun rubbed as stomach and head, nausea blanketing his slender body. He collapsed into the bed and laid there motionless for another hour or so. Tasia looked down at the video player. There was

still at least ten minutes left of footage. She quickly scrolled through the footage to see if anything strange happened next. Towards the end of the file, Darnisha waltzed into the room again, this time with a big, massive nigga with dreadlocks trailing her, looking eager to do something mischievous. The two stood there for a moment before the man unbuckled his pants, and then the video suddenly ended.

"Fuck! Fuck! Fuck!" Tasia sneered as she rewound the video to see if she could get a view of the guy. She'd recognized the semblance of the man, but couldn't quite figure out exactly who this dude was. But whoever he was, now Tasia had her proof Tahmir wasn't involved at all with the rape. Tasia needed to send this file to herself immediately before it was too late. She opened up a web browser and logged into g-mail. Once she had a new e-mail window open, she went to go look for the file on Jashaun's computer. Once she attached it, a error message popped up – "FILE EXCEEDS 25 MB ATTACHMENT LIMIT. PLEASE REDUCE SIZE."

"Fuck!" Tasia growled and pounded her fists on the desk. She needed to get the file to herself ASAP. The only other option was to put the file on a USB drive.

Click! Click! Unexpectedly Tasia heard the bedroom doorknob twist and turn. *Knock! Knock! Knock!* "Why you got the damn door locked?!? Open this shit up!" Darnisha yelled from the other side of the door.

"Shit!" Tasia quickly stood up, then skimmed the room to make sure she didn't leave anything out to make it look like she was being a sleuth.

"Sorry, Aunty! I didn't realize I locked the door," Tasia fake apologized as she stormed towards the door, unlocked it and opened it. Darnisha was standing there with her hands on her hips, her eyes transformed into venomous unblinking slits. "What the fuck was you doin' in there? It don't look like you've been really cleanin'…" Darnisha patted her black satin bonnet covered head.

"Nah, I was. I just didn't want to mess around and move too much of his stuff," Tasia explained as she went over to the bed and began making it up. Tasia reverted to her old self, chucking up her former black mammy "The Help" persona, sounding all meek and shit.

Darnisha didn't say a word. She just stood there, arms folded. She didn't believe Tasia. "Hrrrm," she mumbled. "Hurry the fuck up and get out of here. And stop being nosey. I already know he smokes weed, so if you find his stash, give it to me so I can throw it away." Darnisha then stormed out of the room. "And keep the fuckin' door open too…" Darnisha echoed down the hallway.

Tasia took a deep breath then exhaled in relief. Her ass almost got caught, but now that she had all the evidence she needed to prove

Darnisha's ass conspired with this unknown random ass nigga to frame Tahmir, she was overcome with excitement. Tahmir would soon be free.

~

"I-II-I-I-I juju—just don't know how I'm gonna make it, Mrs. Watkins," Darnisha fake cried in front of Mrs. Watkins. This was Darnisha's second go with the stern social worker, and this time it seemed as if she had all of her shit together. Her I's were dotted. Her t's fucking crossed a million times. Darnisha was adamant on getting this god damn voucher, and by the end of November, her ass was going to be an official resident of Gold Coast. She already visualized her apartment – she wanted a three bedroom apartment, preferably with a balcony. She wanted a kitchen with an island, decked out with stainless steel appliances and marble counter tops. Her true desire though was to live in a building with a rec center and a pool so she could throw kickbacks with some of her girls and a few guys she knew from the 'hood.

"I'm so sorry all of this happened to you, Ms. Johnson. I know it's so hard to lose a baby, especially considering the circumstances." Mrs. Watkins handed Darnisha a napkin so she could wipe those fake tears streaming down her slender yellow face.

Darnisha was on it today. Bitch had her story down. She decided she wasn't going to give the woman any inkling she was a stereotypical ratchet niggerette. Last time her ass was dressed like a typical THOT. But this morning, her ass was dressed like Ms. Celie from The Color Purple. This lying heifer even went as far as not wearing any make up – except she used her mascara pen to color in dark circles under her eyes.

She was wearing this ugly ass maroon and green polka dot sweater she copped for $3 out of the Salvation Army store, along with a pair of non-matching, off brand jeans, and some flats. This bitch was definitely doing too much, but it was working because Mrs. Watkins looked moved by the riveting Oscar performance.

Tasia was sitting off on an adjacent couch, witnessing this bullshit go down. Although at first she wanted the social worker to deny the voucher application for the pettiest reasons, now she wanted her to get the voucher. She wanted Darnisha to get so distracted and side railed with getting this new downtown apartment, hoping it would buy her enough time to get the video to Mr. Liebowitz and hopefully the police and county prosecutors to drop the charges against Tahmir and arrest Darnisha's dumb ass.

Darnisha shook her head and let out another ugly cry. She

scrunched up her face, looking like a retarded baby pitbull. “Dis tew much…All dis…Dis ju-juuust tew much,” she moaned, rocking back and forth. Tasia was dying from laughter on the inside, but held her composure because she just wanted both of these hags to be done so she could get back into Jashaun’s room and get that computer.

“Let me ask you ; What made you think it was a smart idea to invite a convicted felon with a violent past to come live with you? And why didn’t you inform us he was taking residency with you?” Damn, did Mrs. Watkins really ask that?!? PETTY! *Oh shit, oh shit*, Tasia thought to herself.

“Mrs. Watkins, he was a changed man. I was truly trying to help him. I had no idea he’d even do all of this! Ask Tasia. He was such a nice man to all of us! He helped her out tremendously!” Darnisha cried.

Oh no this bitch wasn’t trying to involve her niece in her scheme. Tasia bit her lip, her eyes turned to slits and then she put on a fake smile. “Yes, Mrs. Watkins. We had no idea really. He was so nice to me. He really did so many nice things for us. He never tried to touch me. It just seemed so out of character for him. I don’t believe he did it. I am still in disbelief.”

Darnisha snapped out of her performance and gave Tasia this wicked scowl. She snapped back into being a depressed, remorseful, struggling single mother of three. Mrs. Watkins looked at Tasia with curiosity plastered across her aged face, “What do you mean you don’t believe he did it?”

“I’m just saying…If you ever talk to Tahmir, you’d never think in a thousand years he’d do something like kill a baby and sexually assault a young teen. Especially a young black male at that. Tahmir was far from gay. At least I assumed so.”

Mrs. Watkins paused for a moment. She shook her head, “yeah, well, that’s life for you. It’s a lot of crazy people out here young lady. Anyways, speaking of which, you have changed a lot since the last time I saw you. And you aren’t stuttering anymore?!? Your aunt got you help I see!” Mrs. Watkins praised her.

“…and Tahmir…Tahmir got me help too.” Tasia was trying to dig deep into Darnisha, and although she knew this might come back to haunt her, she was doing this in a way to let her subtly know she was onto her shit and it was just a matter of time before her ass went to prison for LIFE.

“Tahmir helped you lose weight?”

“Yeah, he was a personal trainer…He helped me with my stuttering problem too. He’s the one who found me the speech pathologist. See what I mean? I can’t just imagine a man so evil would also be the man who would change my life in such an extremely

positive way."

Darnisha sat there, fuming on the inside. Her ears were on fire, and she was waiting for the moment for Mrs. Watkins to leave so she could check this young bitch who was trying to show out.

"Well…like I said, that's just the oddities of life. Anyways, Ms. Johnson, I'm going to approve your application. Expect the voucher in the mail within five to seven business days, ok?" Mrs. Watkins smiled and stood up.

"Yess, thank you Jesus, Eih kolo dolo santio sah!" Darnisha busted out in more tears, speaking in tongues and shit. This bitch never stepped foot in a church in her life except for her mama's funeral. Tasia wondered where she pulled that out from.

Like a happy toddler on Christmas, Darnisha dashed towards Mrs. Watkins and gave her a huge hug. Mrs. Watkins hugged her back with slight reluctance. Tasia could tell by her body language she was a bit uncomfortable. "You're welcome. Anyway, I need to leave to get to another client ASAP. You all enjoy the rest of the afternoon."

Mrs. Watkins grabbed her belongings and waltzed out of the apartment.

Once the door was shut, Darnisha locked the door and without warning lunged towards Tasia, "Bitch! You think you fuckin' funny, huh!?!?! I got somethin' for you ugly ass bitch. Just know your days are numbered."

"Bitch, fuck you and fuck your wack ass come up dreams. You're a fucking liar and a thief. That's all your capable of! Oh and probably sucking dick. But you're probably not even that good at it because Tahmir was fucking other bitches left and right while your ass was at home cooking his food." Tasia spat back.

SLAP! Darnisha went across her niece's face. Tasia grabbed her cheek to subdue the reeling, stinging pain. 5-4-3-2-1…Without hesitation, Tasia threw her hands around Darnisha's throat and slammed her against a wall in the living room. The two struggled with each other, but since Tasia now was a blue belt in jiu jitsu and, worked out every single fucking day, she overpowered her crazy aunt, slamming her down to the ground and putting her into a chokehold. Once on the ground, Tasia clawed her muscular thighs around Darnisha's waist, immobilizing her. Then she used all her might to subdue the crazed slummy bitch into a chokehold using her arms. Darnisha, struggling for air, was slowly fading out of consciousness. She was fighting to get air into her smoky lungs. "See how it feels now, bitch? Yeah, bitch…Feel that oxygen escapin' yo lungs, hoe" Tasia growled. This shit would've reminded you just like that scene from from Baby Boy when Melvin came up behind Jody and damn near choked him to death.

Darnisha's watery eyes reddened and all you could hear in the apartment were her gags and chokes as she fought against the suffocation being inflicted onto her. Tasia could've gone further and in one swift swipe snapped that bitch's trachea in half with her grip of death. Seconds later, as Tasia could feel the aunt almost go lifeless, she released her. Darnisha rolled over and then propped herself on her knees and crawled towards the sofa to help herself get up.

"Ge-gget the fuck out of my house, you black greasy bitch!" Darnisha growled, still attempting to get air into her squeezed lungs.

"Bitch, you ain't gotta tell me twice! DEUCES!" Tasia stormed towards her room, packed her gym bag full of clothes. She then stuffed her book bag with all her essentials and then went into Jashaun's room, grabbed the laptop off the desk and then made her way towards the apartment front door. "And as far as my days being numbered – think again bitch. Your days are fucking numbered. Just see…" With that, Tasia sashayed out the apartment.

Darnisha sat down on the couch, grasping her tightened chest, still reeling in the most intense physical pain she'd ever experienced in her entire life. She pulled out her phone, found Ryann's number and called her up.

With long, salty tears flowing down her face, her nose runny, she quivered in angst and anxiety knowing she almost lost her life to a girl who six months ago she almost murdered. The tables were turned. Karma was a bitch and he paid her a horrid visit a few minutes ago. But seeing how Tasia was now unleashed, capable of doing anything, she couldn't risk having her niece run wild anymore. She suspected Tasia was possibly onto her. And she regretted not acting sooner in getting rid of her.

"Hello, wassup babe?" Ryann answered the phone from the tattoo parlor. You could hear tattoo needles buzzing away in the background.

"Tasia almost fucking killed me. I need that bitch to be gone NOW! We gotta do something. She's trying to do me in. I don't know how, but she's got something on me!"

"I TOLD yo dumb ass to let me handle her! What the fuck was you thinkin, bruh!?!? Where the fuck she at?!?" Ryann growled through the phone.

"I don't know. I told her to get her shit and get out. She just left a few minutes ago."

"I'll be there in twenty. Man, see, I told yo ass you need to listen to me! First I told you 'bout Tahmir's shady ass now you got this young bitch outchea, running loose. Bitch almost snapped yo neck in half! Stay yo ass put!" Ryann then hung up the phone.

Darnisha wailed, biting her nails, shaking uncontrollably. Paranoia

was setting in. What did Tasia know? Whatever it was, she needed to not know.

Chapter Fifteen

Beep. Beep. Beep. Beep. Jashaun, still in a coma, had so many tubes running in and out of his motionless, stiff body. As the EKG machine beeped and the respirator pumped oxygen into his lungs, Darnisha rubbed his hand, listening to the doctor give her a prognosis on his condition. Ryann was there with her, consoling her as the doctor informed of Jashaun's condition.

The tall, older white doctor, decked out in a white coat and green scrubs, stood there looking over a clipboard in his hands. "…I hate to be the bearer of bad news, but because of the massive amounts of blood Jashaun lost, he's sustained some brain damage."

"Ohmygod, ohmygod, ohmygod," Darnisha wailed, but this time her tears were real. She didn't think her plan would backfire in such a horrid, monumental way. Yeah, she knew it was fucked up to have her son brutally raped, but she didn't think it would result in him having irreversible brain damage.

"How bad is it though? Will he be able to walk? Talk? How bad is it really?" Darnisha asked, shaking and crying.

"Well, based on the MRIs, it looks like he will have brain damage similar to a stroke victim. We've done a battery of tests on him. His left side is paralyzed, so he'll definitely have issues walking and talking. Once he fully wakes up, he might display some cognitive issues. We plan on taking him out of the coma tonight. Do you plan on being here?"

"Yes! Yes I do!" Darnisha cried. Ryann held her tight in her embrace, assuring her everything was going to be alright. "Don't worry boo, we gon make this shit work. We gon make sure he get right, ok?"

"Ok-kk-k," Darnisha stammered as Ryann pulled her away from Jashaun's bedside. The two slowly and somberly walked out of the room and down the bright hospital hallway to the cafeteria. Darnisha was devastated, and her conscience was eating her alive. She didn't even know how she was going to relay this news to Jasmine.

Once inside the cafeteria, the couple stood in line, grabbing something to eat for dinner. Since the doctors planned on waking

Jashaun out of his coma tonight, they decided they were going to camp out and wait for Jashaun to wake up.

After the two got something to eat, they sat down at a table far off in the corner, away from other hospital visitors and employees. Darnisha, silent, just rocked back and forth, a few tears trickled out the corner of her eyes as she attempted to take a bite out of a green apple. Her eyes were off in distant space, staring at nothing in particular. Guilt overcame her. She couldn't believe she'd let her greed drive her to do something such callous. The crazy thing was though she wasn't remorseful at all about killing Khai. The maniacal hoe bitch didn't even feel a single fucking ounce of sorrow over smothering an innocent newborn to death. The truth was Darnisha never really cared for the baby, and since she would've aborted him had Tahmir not convinced her not to do so, she figured killing Khai wasn't such a bad thing. In her mind he wasn't even aware to even know what was going on.

Her mind was fucked up because she had her only son violently raped so she could frame some one and get them off her back. And now that Tasia was running loose, potentially in possession of some information that could implicate her in the rape and murder, Darnisha didn't know how she was going to make it.

"Babe, what's wrong?" Ryann questioned as she stuck a piece of dry-looking Salisbury steak into her mouth. "Why you not eatin'?"

"My baby…I can't believe I did this to my baby," Darnisha wept.

Ryann dropped her fork, "The fuck you mean '*did this to your baby*? Fuck is you tslkn' bout?" the butch girlfriend growled, becoming visibly upset.

Darnisha quickly snapped out of her dreadful trance, realizing she possibly just confessed to her crime. "No, I mean, I just can't believe I let Tahmir into my house and he did this to my child. My only son."

Ryann's unblinking beady eyes scanned Darnisha up and down. "Well, stop thinking about it so much, bae. It is what it is. We gotta be able to move on from this shit. We just gotta be thankful Jashaun is still alive…"

"Yeah, yeah I guess so…" Darnisha mumbled.

Ryann picked up her fork and continued to eat her dinner as Darnisha slowly chowed on the apple. After the two finished eating, they headed back up to the critical care unit in the hospital where Jashaun was at.

~

"Jashaun, can you hear me, bud?" The doctor waved a tiny flashlight into Jashaun's pupils to see if they would react and dilate. Jashaun's

eyes trailed the light as he blinked. He looked around the room and saw Darnisha standing off to the side, weeping and fearful.

"Try to squeeze my finger, buddy…" The doctor picked up Jashaun's right hand, hoping the boy could wrap his palm around his index finger.

Jashaun slowly squeezed the man's finger. "Good, bud…Good. This is good."

"Can you talk? What's your name?"

"Ja-Jashaun…" he muttered.

"Good…"

Jashaun then looked at his mom and cried, "Why…Why y-yy-you did this to me? Why?"

The doctor gazed over at Darnisha, with Ryann at her side. Darnisha looked back at the doctor and then at Jashaun. She walked over to his side.

"NO! NOOOO! GGG-GGGET AWAY FROM ME! YOU DID THIS TO ME" Jashaun mumbled, his speech was slurred like a stroke victim.

"DID WHAT TO YOU!?! What are you talking about Jashaun?" Darnisha pretended like she had no idea what her son was talking about.

The doctor looked puzzled and alarmed, "What is he talking about Ms. Johnson?"

"I don't know, I really don't know!" Darnisha sniveled. She reached down and tried to grab Jashaun's hand but before she could hold it, he quickly moved his hand. He didn't want the evil bitch touching him at all.

"Pp—pp-please Doctor, tell her to get the FUCK AWAY from me!" Jashaun screamed.

"Doctor, I have no idea what he's talking about! I think he needs some pain meds. Ya'll can't put him on some sort of morphine drip?!?"

The doctor agreed, "Yes. I'll tell the nurse to set up the drip. Jashaun, I think you're in a lot of pain. You suffered some brain damage, so you may be overreacting. It's gonna take some time to get back most of it's function, ok?" The doctor assured him then walked out the room.

"Ryann, let me talk to Jashaun for a minute, ok?"

Ryann stood there, silent and curious. "Hrrrm…Ok…" Once she left the room, Darnisha got into Jashaun's face, "Jashaun, I'm sorry. Please, I know you're in a lot of pain. I didn't think you'd lose as much blood, but I had to do it, baby. I had to. Tahmir is locked up. He's gone baby! Things can go back to normal!"

"I-I-I ai-ai-aain't nn-n-n-n-nnn—oormal now. I cc-cccan't even tt-t-ttttalk right." He slurred as a long, thick string of drool oozed out of his lips like viscous syrup.

“I know, baby. I know. We gon work on that. We can get you physical therapy. Speech therapy. It might take some time, but you’ll be back to your old self soon! I promise!” Darnisha tried assuring him but he was hesitant in believing her.

“I-II-I-I’M GONNA CALL THE PPP—PP-P-PPOLICE AND TT-TTTELL THEM EVERYTHING!”

Darnisha went from apologetic and sorrowful to callous and calculating in a split second once she heard those threatening words come out of Jashaun’s mouth. She looked around the room, and once she felt secure, she threw her hand around his neck, squeezing his throat until he began to choke.

“Listen you punk ass faggot. I told yo dumb ass to keep your damn door locked at all times when you do shit. You got caught. Tahmir found out about you takin dick in your worn out booty hole. He was onto my shit. He had to go. You needed to be taught a lesson. I let you live, so be thankful for that. Now if you try to to say anything stupid, I’ll just end this shit right now! DO YOU FUCKIN’ UNDERSTAND ME?” Darnisha warned.

Jashaun struggled for air, barely able to resist the choke. A few tears crept out of his eyes. All of sudden Darnisha released her grip. Jashaun gasped for air as he nodded in agreement.

“Get it together,” Darnisha cautioned. “Fuck with me, and I’ll fuck you up.”

~

Darnisha exited the hospital room and sauntered up to Ryann who was standing off to the side, texting away on her phone. “Wassup, bae? Everything good?” Darnisha asked and nervously winced.

“Yeah, yeah…Everything cool in there?” Ryann asked.

“Yeah, he was just tweakin’. I don’t know why.” Darnisha fibbed.

“Well, lemme holla at you for a second. We need to talk. Let’s go outside for a sec. I need a smoke anyways.” Ryann, without asking, grabbed her hand and escorted her obviously lying girlfriend down the hall and out to the elevators. After the pair managed to make their way outside, Ryann continued to lead the two to a dark area near a parking garage. She pulled out a pack of Marlboros, pulled out a square, slapped it in her mouth and lit it up. After taking a few puffs, she passed it to Darnisha.

“So, about Tasia. I got a plan in motion for her. I got everything under control.”

“Word?” Darnisha took another puff and passed the cig to Ryann.

Ryann looked around her surroundings, acting all paranoid and shit. She took a long puff from the cigarette, blew out a cloud of

smoke, and then threw the cigarette out. “Let me ask you a question though…You’ve been fuckin lyin’ to me, haven’t you?”

Darnisha scrunched her face up in utter surprise. “What you mean? Why would I lie to you babe?”

Ryann paused for a moment as silence engulfed the two. Ryann looked around again. Once the scene was clear – SLAP! She delivered the most vicious, devastating pimp slap to Darnisha’s yellow face. Ryann balled up her tatted up fist and threw a punch to Darnisha’s jaw and then quickly grabbed her by her shirt collar and slammed her against the wall.

“Bitch, you’ve been lyin’ to me. I know you have. Lyin’ ass bitch. Tahmir didn’t do none of that shit. You did that shit. You paid Jaime to do that shit, didn’t you?” Ryann growled. “You dirty ass hoe. You had your own son raped?”

Fighting against Ryann’s grip, Darnisha looked around for help, “Get off me! Someone! Somebody HEL—”

Before Darnisha could even finish her plea for help, Ryann whipped out a .45 from her back and jammed the pistol deep into Darnisha’s neck. “Bitch shut the fuck up before I kill you. And you know I’ll do it too. I told yo punk ass never play with me. Yo niece let you off, but bitch I’ll finish you. Have yo ass in the cemetery with that ugly ass baby. Don’t you ever fuck with me like that. Now tell me the fuckin’ truth. What the fuck really happened?”

Darnisha gulped and cried, staring down the barrel of the gun jammed in her neck. Beads of sweat along with her tears roamed down her face. She didn’t want to say anything, but feeling that cold steel against the flesh in her neck meant she had to confess, otherwise a bullet was going straight into her jugular.

“Ye-yeah I hired Jaime to rape Jashaun…” Darnisha came clean.

“And what about Khai? Who killed him?” Ryann inquired once more, further jabbing the gun into her neck.

Darnisha’s body quivered as she yowled, not wanting to reveal the truth.

“Tell me bitch! Tell me right now or I’m gonna kill you! Don’t fuck with me!”

“Mm-me. I did it.”

“You dumb bitch!” Ryann pulled the gun from off Darnisha neck and without warning she pistol whipped her. Darnisha fell to the ground, utterly defenseless, holding her head, damn near about to go unconscious. Her cries grew louder and they somewhat echoed into the parking garage.

“Now I got to clean all this shit up. Didn’t I tell you to keep shit simple, you dumb bitch? I should’ve known somethin’ was up! Get yo punk ass up. It don’t hurt that bad,” Ryann grabbed Darnisha off the

ground and slammed her against the wall.

"I told yo ass when I met you I was done being a hitta years ago. Now you pulled me out of retirement. Let's go, we got work to do!" Ryan grabbed her battered girlfriend and walked to her Camaro.

Chapter Sixteen

After Tasia escaped her aunt's apartment without harm, she called up her bestie Marcia who lived all the way out in McKinley Park on the city's southwest side. Her friend, without hesitation, convinced her mama to let her bestie stay with them until she was able to square away her living situation.

The young pseudo-detectives were in Marcia's bedroom, sprawled out on the wood floor with Jashaun's laptop open. After showing Marcia the damning video footage from Jashaun's laptop, the two quickly and tirelessly worked to transfer the incriminating video to an USB drive.

"Oh My God! You were so right Tasia! I cannot believe this!" Marcia cried in excitement as she hugged Tasia. Marcia was so proud Tasia stuck to her guns and followed her intuition.

"I told you! I told you girl! I told you that bitch was a lunatic!" Tasia whipped out the USB drive from the side of the laptop and then closed it. The two got up off the floor, and Tasia put the laptop in her bookbag along with the USB drive.

Tomorrow, after school, Tasia had already scheduled an appointment with Mr. Liebowitz, and she was going to march her proof down to his office. Anxiety riddled her bones, but she knew now nothing was going to stop her. In a few days, she knew once the police and prosecutors got their hands on the video footage, Tahmir was going to be released and they were going to arrest and throw the whole damn book at Darnisha's pathetic ass.

The two girls ate dinner, watched some television, did homework and made their way to bed. Friday morning – 6:45 AM. The girls were awake, getting ready for school. Once they were dressed, they ate a light breakfast, and made their way outside to the bus stop. "I'll meet you down there at Mr. Liebowitz's office at 4!" Marcia reached in, and the two friends embraced each other tightly. "Love you, girl!" Tasia smiled, releasing her friend as she got on the city bus. Tasia's high school was all the way on the opposite side of the city, so she needed to take an Uber to school. Anxiously awaiting the Uber driver's black Honda Accord, she stood there at the corner, ready to get the day

started and over with. The laptop was in her bag, and the USB drive was in her pocket. A part of her was scared, but another part of her was elated – in a few days, she hoped she'd be reunited with Tahmir, and by the grace of God the two of them could become a family. He indeed, after all, was a man who she now saw as her father.

~

1:30 PM. Tasia had an hour left in school, and once the final school bell rang she was going to jet her ass down to Mr. Liebowitz's office and hand him over the video. Although today was Tahmir's arraignment, Mr. Liebowitz told Tasia if she had resounding proof Darnisha conspired to frame Tahmir, no matter what happened today in court, the prosecutors would be forced to throw out the case due to submission of new evidence.

Sitting in her biology class, an anxious Tasia was at her desk, rapidly tapping her pen against her decrepit table, counting each second and minute, wanting 2:30 to be here already.

Knock! Knock! A loud thump came from the classroom door. Mr. Kilpatrick, her biology teacher, got up and strolled over to the door and opened it. Dr. Whitaker, the school's principal, along with a tall, slender, dark skinned man decked out in a maroon tie and navy blue suit was standing next to him, mean mugging the entire classroom. Tasia wasn't really paying attention. All of her focus was glued to the classroom clock.

"Ms. Johnson. We need to see you," Dr. Whitaker echoed. Tasia looked up towards Dr. Whitaker, confused as to what was going on. She gulped, anticipating perhaps Darnisha's ass did something to get her in trouble. "Ok, sir," Tasia responded as she quickly gathered her belongings, put them in her book bag, got up from her seat and made her way towards Dr. Whitaker and the unknown menacing-looking individual.

Trailing behind them down the hallway, Dr. Whitaker lead them into his office and closed the door. "Tasia, this is Detective Speights with the police department. He needs to speak with you about the death of your cousin, Khai and what happened to Jashaun, hrrm-k?"

Tasia was perplexed. Why did this dude want to speak with her? She'd already talked to police about her whereabouts that day and they knew she was in Miami. But then she had an epiphany – maybe they were onto Darnisha as well and they were looking to get some additional information. If that was the case, she was ready to hand them over everything and get Darnisha's ass thrown in a jail cell ASAP.

Dr. Whitaker exited the room to leave the two alone to talk. "Ms.

Johnson, sorry to take you out of class at the last minute. I hear you're a good student, but I'm Detective Speights with the Homicide division. I was just assigned to this case to help the other detectives get down to the nitty gritty because we still have some questions…" Detective Speights pulled out a small notepad and a pen, and then opened up the notepad, ready to jot down notes.

Nausea-inducing butterflies swarmed the pits of Tasia's stomach. She gulped and took a deep breath. She was ready to spill it all.

"So, tell me…This Tahmir guy. We've talked to him and it turns out he may not have been the one who killed Khai. We suspect this was a staged crime and he was set up. Who do you think did it?"

Boom. And there it was. FINALLY! Immense relief came over Tasia, and she quickly thanked God that somewhere somehow the police found a clue proving Tahmir's innocence. "Ohmygod, ohmygod," she cried, tears running down her face, as she rummaged through book bag and pulled out the laptop. "I was just about to go talk to a lawyer because I found this video footage the other day in Jashaun's room! I knew all along Tahmir didn't do it. I never believed it for a split second. Let me show you!

Once she got the laptop opened, she went straight to the video footage and zoomed right into those convicting moments where Darnisha carried out her maniacal plan. Detective Speights nodded his head, "Wow. This is perfect. Here, let's take this and come with me. We need to get down to the station ASAP. We need to put out an arrest warrant for your aunt."

"Ok," Tasia agreed. Detective Speights stood up and helped Tasia gather her belongings. She walked out of Dr. Whitaker's office and followed Detective Speights outside to the school's parking lot to an alley where Detective Speights parked his unmarked black Crown Victoria.

Tasia walked to the front passenger side of the squad car, ready to open the door.

"Hey Ms. Johnson…Sorry, it's department rules I can't let non-police personnel in the front seat," Detective Speights explained.

"Oh…ok," Tasia replied back. "Sorry 'bout that," Tasia stepped to the back seat and tried to open the door, but it was locked. "I got that," Detective Speights uttered. He took out his keys and tried to locate the car key as he held a cell phone in another hand. "Shit!" Suddenly Detective Speights dropped the keys down to the ground along with his phone, instantly grabbing his elbow. Tasia looked at him with concern, "What's wrong?"

"My arthritis…sorry, I have rh-rheumatoid…shit, fuck!" He wailed in pain, scrunching up his face.

"Ohh no, are you okay?" Tasia turned her attention away from the

Detective who appeared to be in severe pain. She leaned down and grabbed the car keys and phone that fell under the car.

GASP!

Detective Speights wrapped his thick, muscular long arm around her neck and put the unaware girl in overpowering chokehold. As she fought against him, throwing punches and kicks, her eyes turned red, watery and glassy. Using all of her might and her jiu jitsu skills, she almost escaped his grip, but the Detective held the girl down. “Stop fightin’ it!” He grimaced. He pulled out a handkerchief with another hand smothered the girl’s nostrils. Seconds later, her body turned limb and she collapsed to the ground. Detective Speights then whipped out a pair of handcuffs, pulled the girl’s arms behind her back and slapped the cuffs on her wrists, tightening them, ensuring her arms would be completely paralyzed. He popped open his trunk, grabbed Tasia’s bookbag and threw it in the trunk. His beady stern eyes scanned the trunk, and he snatched a roll of black duct tape and quickly closed the trunk. He tore off a long piece of tape and wrapped the thick tape over the girl’s mouth and lower head three times over. He opened the backseat of the car, and with all his strength, he lifted the girl into the back and laid her down across the seat.

He quickly made his way to the driver’s side, got in and chucked up the car engine. The “detective” sped down the alley, out of the school’s parking lot and then off onto the expressway. As he zoomed down the e-way, he whipped out his phone, quickly located a contact he was looking for and dialed the number.

Seconds later, a deep-sounding female voice answered the phone. “Waddup, fool?”

“Got her…I’m on my way. Ya’ll got my money?”

“Yeah...” the female voice on the other end responded.

“Good. I’ll be there in twenty.”

“Bet…”

Chapter Seventeen

"Now listen…Remember, keep him all the way distracted. Don't stall. Don't act stupid. I'm gonna bust out the closest and pop his ass, got it?" Ryann instructed Darnisha.

"Ok," Darnisha solemnly replied with fear buried in her voice.

Ryann picked up her .45, loaded it with a clip and cocked it. Her murderous eyes examined it, making sure it was ready to do the hit job. She screwed a silencer on top of it and blew into its tip. "Aiight, let's go."

Ryann got up off the bed inside Darnisha's room in her apartment, sauntered over to a closet, opened it and closed it, hiding and waiting to do a hit.

Knock! Knock! Knock! A loud thump echoed and could be heard all the way into the master bedroom. An anxious and scared Darnisha got up off the bed and quickly made her way down the hallway and to the apartment front door. She unlocked the door, and opened it. "Sup!" she said in a seductive, horny voice.

He didn't respond, he just stormed in, and overpowered Darnisha, grabbing her waist and began to kiss all up and down her neck.

"Damn, dude, calm down! I know you want this pussy, but take it easy!" Darnisha protested, scrunching her face as if she ate a thousand lemons.

"Shiit, a nigga been waitin' for a thousand years to dig up in them guts. Shit my dick already hard as hell just thinkin' about it," Jaime bit his lip and despite Darnisha's objection, he continued to kiss her all up and down her neck as he hugged her.

Appearing uncomfortable and just wanting to get this shit over with, Darnisha fake smiled, "Come on, dude. I got company comin' over soon," she said as she grabbed his hand, and lead him down to her bedroom.

Since Ryann forced Darnisha into confessing that she orchestrated the rape of Jashaun, paying Big Jaime to sexually brutalize the boy, and then murdered Khai, Ryann wanted Jaime dead. He was a walking liability. If shit hit the fan, and the police some way or another got wind of the truth, Jaime could've bumped his gums and

confessed to being paid by Darnisha to rape her son.

Although Ryann wasn't a part of the diabolical plot to frame Tahmir, she herself could've easily been implicated as an accessory to the crime and she wasn't gonna go down for Darnisha's antics. Ryann, back in the day, was one of the most feared hittas in Chi-Raq. A much older woman now, she got out of prison years ago and since did away with her previous lifestyle, opting to go back to school and become a tattoo artist. But now that she found herself somewhat intertwined in all of this madness, she had to temporarily revert back to her old ways, and put in some work.

Once Darnisha and Jaime got inside the bedroom, Darnisha unfastened her satin robe, dropping it to the floor. She was naked, and her succulent red titties glistened with coconut oil. Jaime bit his lip at the sight of her lightly shaven cooch. "Fuckk," he growled and rubbed his hands. Darnisha fake smiled and sat on the bed as she watched him quickly take his clothes off. He kept his gray tank top on, but everything else was off.

Jaime was a brutish monstrous giant. Everything about him was overwhelming and dark, even his thick, blood engorged, damn near foot long dick. His cock's tip was the size of a baseball and his shaft looked thicker than a water pipe. As his dick jumped up and down in excitement, it oozed a thick trail of precum. Darnisha gulped. Although the plan wasn't for her to actually jump on this monster's dick, from the way Jaime was salivating at the sight of tearing into her nookie, Darnisha didn't know how in the fuck she was going to meander her way to distract Jaime. She just hoped Ryann would bust through the closet at any minute now and rescue her from the potential of having to let that dick get inside her.

"I wanna taste that dick, come over here," Darnisha beckoned the viciously hungry freak goliath to her. Not saying anything, he just growled like a hungry wolf. "No, I hate head. I just want the pussy," Jaime howled. Without hesitation he grabbed Darnisha off the bed, turned her over and was seconds away from inserting himself inside her.

"Ohmygod, ohmygod!" Darnisha cried as she felt the fist-like dick tip touch the entrance of her dry coochie. She couldn't get wet for some shit like this. The idea of getting piped down by someone wasn't her problem, truth be told. She was just bothered by the fact that the same man she hired to rape her son in the most savage manner was about to pretty much do the same thing to her, but in a more consensual manner.

The other day she hit up Jaime, telling him she wanted to fuck. He was hesitant at first because it seemed so off she'd make a request like that, but she was persistent, obviously because Ryann told her she'd

better make it happen, otherwise she was gonna blow her brains out.

PLOW! Ryann busted through the closet door with the gun hoisted in both hands. “What the fu—"

Jaime was taken by surprise, but before he could bust a move to defend himself from his looming death, Ryann squeezed the trigger on the blicky and let shots blast the rapist beast, shells flying all over the place, hot steel penetrating his Jaime’s thick black muscular flesh.

POW! POW! POW! POW! POW! POW!

Jaime collapsed to the floor, and Darnisha scrambled to the headboard of the bed, scared as shit. As much of a violent abusive bitch she was, she wasn’t no ruthless, murderous savage like Ryann. Aside from killing her own son, this was the first time she’d ever witness someone get killed right before her very own eyes.

Ryann tucked the gun in the back of her pants and lunged up to Jaime’s lifeless body as he lay in a thick crimson pool of blood. She kneeled down, tucked her two fingers under his neck, checking for a pulse. “Good, fuck nigga is dead…,” she growled, and then got up and made her way closer to the bed, looking sternly at Darnisha. “Get yo dumb ass out the bed, get a bucket and mop, a bunch of plastic bags, and turn the music up. We ain’t done yet.”

Darnisha, tears forming her eyes, mumbled “Ok…”

~

After Darnisha and Ryan worked for the next four hours cleaning up the murder scene, Ryann called up a few of her guys who she used to bang with to help her dispose of the body. She told them Jaime tried to rape Darnisha. Since Ryann used to be that nigga in the streets, her clout gave her the permission to get people to help her out under any circumstance ‘cuz they knew she was a triple OG.

Once she paid her boys to do what they needed to do to get rid of the body, Ryann and Darnisha headed out to the far south suburbs in Dolton to go meet up with another long-time fellow comrade at an abandoned warehouse – Denzel “Tre” Speights – better known as Detective Speights. Once.

Back in the day, Ryann, known then as Lil ReRe and Tre, used to bang together, putting so much fucking fear in the streets. Niggas had more bodies on them than a Chinese cemetery. But when Ryann went to prison for second degree murder, Tre quickly changed up his act. He went back to a local community college, then went downstate to get his bachelor’s and came back with a bachelor’s in criminology. He got a job working as a police officer with the Chicago Police Department and quickly rose through the ranks, becoming a detective.

Although you’d assume this dude was one of the “good guys” now,

he was far from it. He was a dirty ass cop – corrupt as they come, using his newfound power and badge to still control the streets. He was now working on retainer as an enforcer for the Lobos Locos Mafia, one of the largest Mexican drug cartels in Chicago.

Ryann pulled up to the abandoned warehouse's parking lot. It was fifteen past midnight. Vicious streams of Lake Michigan air danced in the chilly sky. Ryann turned off the Camaro's engine, and her and Darnisha got out the car and made their way to the back entrance of the warehouse. Once they approached one of the doors near the docking station, Ryann pulled out her phone, and dialed Detective Speights. "I'm outside, bruh."

"Cool…"

BUZZ! Suddenly the door buzzed and clicked open. Ryan opened the door, and the couple walked in, making their way down the dimly lit, foul smelling hallway towards the warehouse floor. As they got closer , Darnisha's eyes turned to slits as they attached to what she made out to be the shape and form of Tasia covered in a blanket, slumped over in a chair.

Detective Speights was standing off to the unconscious girl's side, waiting for the couple to show their presence. The detective and Ryann shook up, dapping to their gang handshake and hugged each other. "Damn boy! You been hittin' the weights!" Ryann exclaimed, squeezing Tre's arms.

"Girl, I been had these!" He responded, but his eyes were scanning Darnisha up and down. He liked what he saw, and if that wasn't Ryann's bitch, he would've been all over her. Tre extended his hand, "I'm Tre…You must be Darnisha…" Detective Speights smiled.

"Yeah…yeah, I am" Darnisha stuttered. Her ass was taken aback by Tre's muscular frame, buttery dark brown skin and his perfect white grill. This nigga was a gorgeous specimen, and if Ryan's murderous ass wasn't standing next to him, she'd jump all over the dick.

"Anyways, we gotta get straight to business…" Ryann interjected. What she could tell was some low-key flirting, although she assumed Tre wouldn't cross her like that and try to fuck her bitch.

"So, where's the cash at?" Tre questioned.

"Here," Ryann pulled out a manila envelope from her White Sox jacket and handed it to Tre. He opened the enveloped, fumbled through the bills, and closed back it up.

"So, you found any buyers yet?"

"I'm still workin' on it. I gotta go talk to Boss man to get an update. You know this type of shit ain't his line of business…"

"Shit, selling young bitches is a big business bruh. Fuck is you talm'bout?" Ryann spat, scrunching up her face and raising her brow.

“We need her ass gone ASAP! Tell buddy to bust a move man. And our price is still a hunned-k..”

Tre smacked his teeth and laughed. “I still see you greedy as hell. This young ghetto bitch might get at the most $10,000. Most of the pervs that buy bitches want skinny white bitches, not black greasy hoes.”

Ryann vehemently disagreed, shaking her head no, “Nah, fuck that. $100k, minimum.”

Tre shook his head, “Fine, whatever…But I’m still getting’ my cut. Ten percent.”

“That’s cool,” Ryann responded. “Anyways, we finne bounce. I’m tryna tap this pussy tonight, ain’t that right, bae?” Ryann then smiled and licked her chops, looking Darnisha up and down, rubbing her hands.

Chapter Eighteen

SPLASH! “Wake up, lil hoe,” Detective Speights threw a bucket of cold water on Tasia, confined to a chair in the middle of the abandoned warehouse.

Slowly opening her eyes, she quivered as the cold damp air mixed with the water, froze her body. She resisted at first, trying to fight against her confinement, but thick pairs of handcuffs enslaved her to the metal frame seat.

“Why are you doin’ this to me!?! Who the fuck are you?!?” Tasia cried and shouted, still aimlessly fighting the jangling thick silver handcuffs.

“Don’t worry ‘bout all that. Listen. You’re going away. But I’m tellin’ you right now, you play nice and you might just live. Fuck around with me, you’ll get smoked, do you understand me, lil girl?” Detective Speights warned, holding his pistol.

“Okk-kkk,” Tasia stuttered. Shit, this was the first time in a long time she stuttered. Tears formed in the corners of her doe brown eyes, and her anxiety was on level one thousand. As she looked around the warehouse, trying to get an idea of where in the fuck she was at, she didn’t know if she was going to live or die. Whoever Detective Speights truly was, she knew Darnisha had to have put him up to kidnapping her.

He walked up to her and wrapped a black blindfold around her eyes, her vision succumbing to the shroud of darkness. She then heard what sounded like duct tape being ripped off a roll. “What are you doing? What are you about to d—” before Tasia could finish her sentence, thick black sticky tape wrapped around her mouth, muzzling her question. Her screams devolved into an inaudible, fading muffled sound.

Detective Speights pulled out a syringe from his jacket and stuck a needle into the girl’s neck. Seconds later, her crying silenced, her head cocked to the side. She faded into a deep, unconscious sleep awaiting her fate.

~

A few days later…

3:31 AM – Detective Speights was standing alone, silent, anxiously tapping his right foot impatiently. His black Stacy Adams dress shoes ricocheted off the gravel of a parking garage's rooftop like tiny gunshots. Frustrated and very fucking concerned, he was waiting for one of his guys, Poot, to arrive with Tasia. He looked at his thin, gold Rolex and saw that it was after 3:30 AM. Seeing the time made him jump in frustration.

The corrupt cop turned on his feet and glanced over at the buyer who put down the highest bid to secure the young ebony sex slave. But by the look of mistrust plastered all over the client's face, Tre realized shit was beginning to look really fucked up. Perhaps even suspicious. Truth be told, Tre, wasn't really a superstitious nigga, but something about this time of night, or *morning*, made him feel uneasy and apprehensive. "*Where the fuck is this nigga at?"* He thought, still tapping his twelve-and-a-half-inch foot against the ground.

His thoughts were laced with irritation, wondering what in the fuck was taking Poot's black ass so damn long. Tre's brown eyes scanned the sky above the top level of the empty downtown parking deck, hoping Poot was seconds away from arrival.

Tre was freezing and shivering his ass off as vicious streams of cold lake front air cut through his suit. Early November mornings in the Chi were unforgiving this time of year and as a Chi-town native, his ass knew he should've worn something much warmer. As he rubbed his frigid hands together to generate a little heat in his hands, he kept scanning the area, keeping a close eye on the client who was about to buy Tasia.

Although Tre was partly dressed for the weather, he didn't suspect he'd be standing outside for so long. If Poot was on motherfuckin' time, his suit jacket wouldn't have been such an issue. Wherever he was, Poot needed to hurry his ass the fuck up.

Echoing sounds of distant police sirens mixed with light traffic floated up from below him like ghosts up from a grave. Though Chi-town was a city always in play, this early morning seemed very different. A menacing quiet enveloped Tre's surroundings, making the moonless night all the blacker and planting the seed for his growing paranoia.

"Are you sure your guy is still coming?" The middle-aged white client standing off to his side asked with nagging doubt and scorn.

The cartel boss Tre worked for helped him secure a client interested in buying a young piece of ass to keep hidden in his basement. Although Tre was used to dealing exclusively with dope and guns, sex trafficking wasn't something he was too fond of. As a cop, he knew the stakes were much higher when you were dealing

with bodies. The jakes, feds and other authorities were somewhat numb to drugs and guns – but selling off bitches to thirsty ass wealthy white men was something he always found a bit dishonorable –even for a criminal nigga like himself. And now that he was a cop, albeit a dirty cop, he knew he was treading some dangerous ass waters.

His apprehension about tonight was also turned the fuck up from the moment he met this seemingly strange ass cracka. A mixture of his street sense and police detective training had him very suspicious of this dude. It was something off about him – well, anyone buying a bitch through a sex trafficker was off. But this "off-ness" Tre's intuition sensed was something otherworldly. Something demonic. Tre, hearing the client's cracking voice, turned on his feet and looked the man up and down with slight anger written into the features of his dark brown face. Tre could tell from the man's facial expression and body language he was not impressed with the way he was handling tonight's transaction.

Tre fake smiled, "Of course I am," he replied. "He should be here in just another minute," Tre tried to sound reassuring. "Just be patient, dude…"

Tre dipped into his jacket pocket and snatched out his black Samsung Galaxy 8. He typed in a passcode to unlock the screen, pulled up his recent calls list, pressed Poot's name and jerked the phone up to his ear in one tight motion. He crossed his arms and hoped he wouldn't get Poot's his voicemail again.

Tre turned around, looked at buddy again, and fake smirked. This weird ass cracka gave off an aura of insatiable thirst, irking the shit out of Tre. This was going to be the first and last time he did some shit like this. The only reason why he did it truth be told, was to help out Ryann and to make an easy ten thou. Scanning the man up and down again, Tre noticed this peckerwood's dick was straining against the crotch of his business suit as he fiddled around, looking paranoid his damn self. Maybe this dude thought Tre was going to kill him and take off with his money.

But as seconds continued to grow into minutes, Tre assumed the client's impatience would drive him to call off the deal. If that happened, he was going to be one pissed ass nigga. Why? First, he already kidnapped a young bitch – something he'd never really done before. Two, a good amount of money was at stake, and lastly, he was doing something completely out of his realm of expertise.

Yo, this Poot, I can't get to the phone right now... the voicemail kicked in. "Shit!" Tre uttered under his breath. Silence then came in between the two men standing alone on the parking garage's rooftop. Seconds later, the client rushed towards Tre, now visibly upset, and got a few centimeters away from Tre's face, so close you'd think this

motherfucker was either about to kiss him or try to fight him. “Where the fuck is this friend of yours at man?!? Are you guys trying to fucking scam me?!?”

Tre snapped back, surprised the man ran up on him like that. Tre’s disposition suddenly changed, and the inner-hitta in him kicked into full gear. This cracka didn’t realize he was fucking with the wrong one.

“Whoa! Whoa! Whoa! Yo! Back the fuck up!” Tre growled, putting his hands up. Then without warning he slid his Beretta from the holster inside his jacket, pointed the gun at the guy’s chest, finger ready on the safety, his form flawless.

“Don’t come up on me like that! I’ll light yo white ass up! Now back the fuck up!” Tre commanded as he pressed the gun further into the man’s chest. The client quickly raised his hands in the air at the sight of the gun and took a half step back. “Jeezus! I’m just wondering what the fuck is taking so long!”

“Ay man, you actin’ strange as shit. You really buggin’ the fuck out, actin’ all antsy and shit. I just tried to call my guy. He’s gonna be here any second now, calm the fuck down?!?”

“Fine, fine, fine. Whatever…” the white guy coolly responded and bit his tongue.

Then, lo and fucking behold, headlights flooded the gravel and cinder block walls of the upper deck. A black Cadillac Escalade, windows tinted, pulled in front of Tre and the client and stopped.

“See asshole, I told you. Now let’s get this shit over with.” Tre spat. The client didn’t respond.

Seconds later, Poot opened the SUV’s door, and lifted himself from the soft black leather driver’s seat, and took a long look at the scene before him. Poot was the typical goon nigga – tall, weighed over 300 pounds, his body a blocky mixture of built up muscle and Applewood bacon fat. He was wearing all black – a black Sox cap, tight black long sleeve polo, black leather jacket, black jeans and some black Jordans.

Not bothering to apologize for being late, the giant goon felt the tension between Tre and the white guy. Poot stepped forward and grabbed the white man’s arm and walked him to the back of the trunk, “This way,” he growled.

Tre followed behind the two men and waited. Poot popped the trunk and said nothing as the client peered in.

“Bout fucking time,” the crazy white guy licked his lips and rubbed his hands like he was about to devour a T-bone steak. A disgusting grin split the features of his pale face as he grabbed and massaged his still hard dick.

“You like what you see?” Tre asked from behind the two men, his anxiety somewhat diminishing. The unease he felt earlier still

lingered, but he pushed it to the far back of his mind.

"Yes, yes, yes…Thick and chocolate just like how I like'em," the perverted white motherfucker licked his lips and began unbuckling his belt, ready to get a taste of Tasia. His voice was thin and high, and just hearing it made Tre's skin crawl.

"Man, what the fuck is you doin?!? Do that shit elsewhere," Tre barked in disgust. "Yo, I'm gettin' inside the truck. We're done here! Give my mans the cash once you get the young bitch out of here!"

Tre turned his focus towards Poot and pointed with a shaking hand to a nearby all-white, unmarked moving truck. "Put the bitch in there, and let's get the fuck outta here," he said, making his way to the passenger seat of the Escalade. "Don't take all fucking night, neither," he added, letting Poot know he hadn't forgotten about his tardiness.

Tre opened the Escalade's front passenger door, jumped in the plush leather seat and fastened his seat belt. From the rear-view mirror, he closely watched Poot lift an unconscious Tasia from the back of the trunk and throw the young girl over his broad shoulder.

"Right this way," the client led Poot to the moving truck, eager to have this early morning transaction wrapped up as well so he could hurry back home and feast on his new dessert. He walked towards the all-white Ford utility van he'd purchased for these types of transactions. The client's brown cowboy boots crunched across the gravel, providing the only noise heard, and it creeped Poot the fuck out as he followed closely behind.

Arriving at the back end of the truck, the client hitched one foot up on the back of the moving truck, lifting the silver cargo door. The clatter of metal on metal echoed, pausing the momentary silence of the early morning, making both men unconsciously wince against it. Inside the cargo hold was a dark blue plastic tarp, thin mattress, and a blanket.

"Home sweet home!" the client exhaled suddenly and laughed as he climbed his way in. "Just throw her on up here," he called from the inside, arranging the *comfy* space he made for the girl.

His red face once again smiled as he rubbed his strong but raw-looking hands together in anticipation. Careful not to bump her, Poot stepped up into the space and gently laid the young girl down atop the mattress. He brushed the hair from her face and thought to himself how pretty she was and felt a slight twist in his gut at the fate awaiting her once she woke up.

"Thank you, friend," the client said from behind him, far too close for comfort. He then handed Poot a briefcase. Poot snatched it and tucked it in between his right side, ready to get back to the Escalade. The client had his hand outstretched to give Poot a handshake. "I ain't your fuckin' friend, now get the fuck on," Poot snarled, turning to look

once more at the unconscious girl lying there.

He hopped down from the truck's tailgate and made his way across the parking lot, back to the Escalade. From the passenger seat Tre watched the client in the cargo area with revulsion. The client looked left and then right as he slowly pulled down the silver door, his face and body disappearing in inches as the heavy silver closed completely.

Poot opened up the driver's door of the Escalade and slid in, his weight causing the SUV to lean and moan a tad bit. Once inside, he handed Tre the briefcase, "Fuckin' weird ass cracka!" muttered Poot, reaching into his jacket pocket, pulled out a ring of keys and quickly inserted the truck's key into the ignition, starting it up. The corrupt detective sat the briefcase in his lap, clicked it open and quickly counted the bundles of money inside—$100,000, exactly as agreed upon. Smiling, he closed it up. "Finally!"

"Bro, what the fuck took you so fuckin' long?" Tre grimaced with his widened eyes focused on Poot. "I had to up the pole on that muhfucka!"

"Man, shorty woke up!" Poot shook his head.

"What the fuck you mean she woke up, bruh?" Tre got nervous.

"Yeah bro, she woke the fuck up! Then she tried to fight me. Shorty a beast for real for real. We went at it for like ten minutes before I managed to knock her ass out! Bro, I hope that motherfucker knows what he's doin' 'cuz she's gonna fight to the death. And if her ass escapes, that shit might come back on us." Poot explained, commanding the steering wheel with one hand, as he used the other to search the inside of jacket pocket, looking for his pack of Black-N-Milds.

Tre lowered and shook his head, "Fuckkk. Man, I don't even know why I let ReRe's butch ass get me into this fucking bullshit."

Poot snickered, "How much you gettin' for this shit anyways? I hope you getting' at least a hunned thousand or some shit?"

Tre paused for a second… "Nah, she paid me a couple of stacks plus ten thousand to find buddy."

Poot scrunched his face up in surprise, "Nigga what!?!? You doin' all this shit for that chump change?"

Poot was right. Ten thousand wasn't shit, and Tre could've easily made that in a night just be flipping a couple of bricks. But that night he met up with Ryann, he quickly realized he was a bit distracted by Darnisha. Besides, him and Ryann were niggas for life, and he just wanted to help gang'nem secure a bag.

The more he thought about it, and the more he could see Poot shake his head in disbelief, the more he felt he should get a bit more out of doing all this. Shit, the truth was, if shit were to go down, Tre was the one who put himself more on the line than Ryann.

Tre and Poot sped off onto Lake Shore Drive. It was now approaching 4 AM and all Tre wanted to do was hit the hay for a few hours before he headed to the station to begin his shift. He was gonna meet up with Ryann later on that night to drop off her cash, and possibly renegotiate his cut.

Chapter Nineteen

Tasia slowly opened her eyes, her vision was blurred as she rolled into consciousness. It took a few moments for her to shake off drug-induced confusion and haziness. But once her mind gained some degree of clarity, she instantly understood with every cell in her terrorized, kidnapped body she was still trapped in a nightmare. But this shit right here wasn't being a dream – this was her fucking reality. Looking from left to right, her surroundings were completely unrecognizable.

Where in the fuck am I? she thought to herself, nausea beginning to invade her body. Instantly she damn well knew two things for certain: she was tied up, and she was hanging upside down from the ceiling – fully naked. She took a few small frantic breaths. With desperate panic rising in her chest, she scanned the strangely arranged room she was in. Not able to make out much, the room was wide with a low ceiling. Her hair touched and swiped the floor as she struggled in a fruitless attempt to free herself from her tightly bound wrists.

Stainless steel handcuffs bit sharply into her abused dark brown skinned flesh, and she could feel a moan of terror swell deep within her. Tasia tried to cry out, but a wash cloth was stuffed in her mouth with duct tape wrapped around her lower head. She could scream all she wanted, but only she could hear herself. *How did I get here?* Hazy, rapid thoughts of dread screamed inside her head as she struggled to remember the last few hours. All she could remember was being at school and meeting up with "Detective" Speights inside of Dr. Whitaker's office. Next thing you know, she remembered briefly waking up in what she knew was a warehouse or some shit, and then blacking out again, only to now wake up to being trapped and imprisoned in this cold, murky room. While her eyes worked to adjust to the dim lighting, she smelled a mixture of rose petals, mildew, and a piercing, overpowering chemical burning the hair inside of her nostrils. Whatever that chemical was – that shit smelled like a toxic, lethal mixture of bleach, Pinesol and hydrochloric acid.

She didn't know what the smell could be, but the combination of hanging upside down plus the stinging aroma exaggerated her nausea.

She would've thrown up all over the place now, but she had nothing in her stomach to vomit. Still struggling against being bound and handcuffed, her focus then shifted to a faint sound of classical music coming from somewhere deep inside the room, beyond the fringe of her limited and blurred vision. The soft, slow-paced music then made her wonder perhaps maybe she was inside the basement of a funeral home or some shit and that was why classical music was playing. Lifting her upper body slightly she could see her hips, legs, and torso were tightly bound with fresh thick light brown rope. Her feet, bound more tightly at the ankle, were fixed to a thick, gleaming silver hook that hung from the ceiling.

Ohmygod! *ohmygod! ohmygod*! *Please God! Please!* She prayed with all her mental might as she fought against the chaos of her rapid, dreadful thoughts.

Tasia's eyes were restless and unblinking. She squeezed them shut to clear the flow of nonstop salty tears and immediately gained animal-like focus. Zeroing in on her survival, she now needed to know her exact location or anything at all that could help her escape. Her terrified eyes scanned the room again from left to right, revealing nothing useful and she felt her extreme panic return as she saw what appeared to be wooden boxes delicately placed throughout the chilled room.

What in the fuck are in those boxes? Angling her body, muscles tight as she moved against the ropes, she saw mannequins standing far off in the corner of the room. They looked like the vintage Macy's models, their chipped painted faces staring back at her.

The structure of the room, what little she could make of it, revealed wherever she was at – a house, funeral home, abandoned building, wherever – had to be huge. Shit, she figured she could've been inside a mansion. This knowledge didn't help, in fact only increased her frustration. She knew she could've been anywhere; the city and the suburbs were full of old large houses. Shit, she could be somewhere on the south side like Hyde Park or all the way out in Burr Ridge.

Her body tremored, wracked with fear as well as cold. She worked to curl herself against the frigid air and was disheartened to see her breath plume before her in frightened puffs as she exhaled from her nose. The room was like a refrigerator. She desperately searched the room again looking for a possible exit, but all she could see was a huge metal door, like the entrance to a hidden vault at the top of a stairwell.

Click! Click! What's that noise!? Tasia jumped, and her heart began to race as she heard the huge metal door click open. Her eyes widened as they fixed on the silhouette of someone standing in the doorway. As

she heard the person's footsteps softly tap against the steps of the stairwell, her heart raced and pounded a million beats per minute.

Terrified as to what would happen next, she peered through the cold and stiff air to see a man walking towards her. He was wearing nothing other than a jet-black towel wrapped around his waist. *What the fuck!?* She began to cry uncontrollably as she knew then this wasn't police or someone else there to save her – this person was there to put harm on her. Shit, this was her looming death, Tasia presumed.

"I'm not much of a fan," the half-naked white man gestured vaguely, stopping directly in front of her. Tasia looked into his face and saw his medium-sized blue eyes widened.

The man then walked over to a wall and flicked a switch. Radiating blue light filled the room, causing Tasia to blink against the sudden intensity. Her cries were signs of confusion, anger, and deep anxiety. But the man, who apparently wanted to show a degree of care, rushed to explain himself.

"Not you darling, I'm very much a fan of yours," he smiled, running a finger up her cheek. "No, I meant the music. I despise Brahms."

He took slow paces in front of Tasia as he absorbed the increasing pitch and volume of her cries. Her display of fear did nothing to slow or stop his crazed monologue.

"Are you into Bach?" he asked nonchalantly. Then he bent down to see her young dark brown face more closely. "I believe you'll love his minor pieces," he laughed and kissed her cheek, giving her a small spin like a toy on a string. "Some of them make beautiful wedding music."

The sickening spin provided only flashes of him, but she could see that this sick, deranged white motherfucker was in good shape, late-30s to maybe mid-40s. He looked like a younger, ripped version of Tom Cruise. Tasia's eyes scanned the man up and down, quickly noticing his six pack. His body was hard and muscle striations covered him as he spent the next few moments flexing in a mirror attached to a wall.

His hair was completely gelled. He was neatly shaven and when she caught glimpses of his hands, she could tell he regularly visited a nail salon.

The crazed man then waltzed back over to Tasia. "You, my darling," he spoke with real appreciation as he lightly stroked her legs and feet, "you are so perfect. I'm so satisfied with this purchase." He tickled her lightly, playfully at first, and then much harder. His greedy fingers bit into her flesh as she struggled and screamed. He stuck his tongue out and then planted it on her chest and made his way down to her stomach, making her quiver as she stifled a gag. Once he

arrived at her crotch, he parted her lightly shaven coochie lips with his tongue and took a sniff.

Faint weeps poured from Tasia's muffled mouth. This was the first time ever in her teenage life she had someone sexually violate her body in such manner. For a split second, she'd do anything to actually be back in the "comfort" of Darnisha's house. She'd much rather deal with Darnisha's bullshit than to be held captive by someone who now was going to possibly full-on rape her.

"Wow?!" He took his mouth from her body and leaned down to speak directly in her ear. "Are you a vegan? You taste like one. Martina over in the corner is a vegetarian. You two taste so similar."

She stared at him in terror; her large eyes seemed huge, magnified by her tears.

"Aww, don't cry pretty girl. Everything will be ok," he tweaked her nose, like someone's granddaddy might do. "I promise I won't hurt you. I never hurt anyone. I make everything as painless as possible."

Stripping the towel from his waist and now completely naked, the man stood before Tasia proud. His hardened dick jutted out from his body like a weapon. Tasia gulped, wondering how he might choose to hurt her with it. He turned on his bare feet, giving Tasia a view of his waxed pale ass cheeks. He then sauntered away from her to another corner of the room. Tasia strained to see where he'd gone—not far, she could tell. She could hear him whistling an off-key imitation of the classical music he claimed he hated so much.

He returned seconds later with a small bottle that appeared to be some sort of scented oil. Once he cracked it open, the room instantly reeked of eucalyptus, filling Tasia's nostrils with its thick, heavy scent.

"Almost forgot some last touches," he chuckled, pouring the thick liquid into his hands.

Setting the bottle down on small side table she noticed before he came in the room, the naked white man began to rub himself with long, slow strokes, making sure every inch of his well-trimmed body was covered with the oil. With his devilish blue eyes attached to Tasia, he had to make sure she was watching him.

"I'm ready Martina! Let me put on some better music though," he said brightly, making his way to a speaker system Tasia couldn't see.

The music, though quiet, had been the soundtrack of this nightmare and its end brought her situation into sharp focus. Tasia just knew this was it – she was going to be raped and then she should die here. Here, among rotting furniture and the dead eyes of department store mannequins staring at her.

Having spent about three or four minutes flipping through what seemed a vast collection of music, she heard the man give a squeal. Then she heard the scrape of a CD being pulled from a case.

“Ahah!” He turned, all smiles, “Marvin Gaye never fails for special moments like these.”

♪Get up, get up, get up, get up!
Wake up, wake up, wake up, wake up!
Oh, baby now let's get down tonight
Ooh baby, I'm hot just like an oven
I need some lovin'♪

“And baby, I can't hold it much longer. It's getting stronger and stronger,” sang the psychotic white man as he did a gyrating two-step to the music.

He slowly walked and danced as he made his way to the corner of the room. Tasia watched in horror, wondering what he was planning to do next, his naked body glistening with oil. The mysterious yet psychotic man made his way towards another part of the room.

Tasia couldn’t see, but it was apparent there was another door inside of what Tasia now assumed was the basement of a house. The man opened the door and shivered as a blast of cool air released from what looked like a large, restaurant-style walk-in meat freezer. Before he walked in, he stepped his feet into a pair of flip flops next to the door of the huge freezer.

Despite being naked, he didn’t let the extreme and bitter cold of the freezer deter him from entering. He walked in with complete ease and stared down an aisle of bodies dangling from hooks in the ceiling in the room like carcasses in a butcher’s shop. Having reached a particular woman’s corpse that was hanging off all the way in the back of the room, he stopped and admired her and began to touch her stiff, cold flesh.

“You, my love, are ready…”

He smirked. He was in complete admiration of himself for having chosen the woman of the hour. With almost graceful movements, he unhooked the body of a woman who looked she was in her mid-twenties. Despite her flesh being frozen and blue, her skin emanated a light brown hue indicating she was possibly Latina or Black.

Parts of the woman’s naked body were covered in bruises, though rot was not visible. Somehow, the deranged man managed to preserve the woman’s body and prevent full on decomposition. Her body was thick and proportioned, and possessed a set of full breasts. Her black hair was long, thick and curly – probably qualities the man vetted for.

With an “oomph” he freed her from her hook and began dragging her from out of the freezer and back into the main room. He dragged her lifeless body on the ground with a fair amount of effort.

“Ooh wee baby, you gained a few since we last saw each other.”

Laughing at his joke, he continued their journey across the floor.

Tasia, still observing in fear, could see what he meant by his seemingly crude remark. The woman didn't gain a few pounds from eating birthday cake and fried chicken; her body appeared to be slightly bloated from gradual decomposition.

"I know my bride…I know you've been longing for our reunion. But I'm here now. I'm here to manifest your wildest fantasies. Paradise."

His labored breathing filled the room and mingled with the Marvin Gaye ballad. Even from upside down, Tasia could see the outline of a bed away in the room. The bed looked like it held a queen size mattress and its headboard was made of thick mahogany wood that had gothic insignia carved into it.

As the man made his way towards the large bed, he threw Martina up on top, her frozen weight made a thud as she settled. He moved her stiff arms straight down to her sides so that she appeared resting.

"I'm gonna give you the best massage you ever had in your life." He said, closely examining his "date."

The bed shifted under his weight as he carefully reclined beside her. His pink dick stood straight up, eager for whatever lay ahead. Reaching down, he snaked his hand underneath the bed and felt around. Tasia couldn't see what he was looking for, but his hand came up a moment later to reveal yet another bottle of oil. Her vision skewed by being upside down and the resulting rush of blood to her head gave everything a dream-like quality. Almost—except for the smell.

Death and eucalyptus were everywhere, and she felt certain she would never draw another clean breath again. Tasia watched in horror as the crazy motherfucker rubbed oil onto Martina's cold dead body. He seemed not to mind the oil rolling off her unyielding frozen flesh and seeping into the floral sheets below. *Sexual Healing* played itself over and over on some sort of insane loop adding to the insanity of the moment. Apparently, he really did just love this song.

"You don't mind do you?" said the man, getting up from the ravaged remains of Martina. He walked over to Tasia and kneeled down, "I usually don't have people watch, but I didn't know where to put you upstairs," he shrugged, "kinda ran out of space."

Though her mouth sealed, Tasia screamed and cried, begging though her gag for him to please let her go.

"I can't understand you," he said, cupping his ear as if to hear her better. "I'll take your silence as you don't mind. I knew you had a little freak in you. The other girls didn't like watching," he winked at her and began the task of unhooking Tasia from the ceiling.

Fear caused her body to vibrate as he effortlessly hoisted her

across his muscular, cut shoulders. Tasia cried as her eyes zoomed in on the dead, frozen girl on the bed.

"Whoopsie daisy," the man cried out as he plopped Tasia onto a chair next to the bed. He slightly bent over at the waist, breathing heavily from the exercise. "I know I said I wanted a thicker girl, but you cutie, are a THICK one, for sure" he shook his head and laughed. "You kind of remind me of a young Patti LaBelle."

Hanging upside down made Tasia feel nauseous, but she was glad – at least for the moment – to be upright again. Returning to the real lady of the hour, the psycho sidled up to Martina's back and cuddled her well-oiled corpse. He fondled her cold breasts and whispered sweet nothings into ears that would never hear another sound. He kissed her dead blue lips, and kept repeating, "I love you too, baby…" Was he hearing voices?

Once the foreplay was over, he mounted the corpse and without hesitation inserted himself into Martina's stiff, frozen pussy. Tasia was in complete shock, so much so that the sight of watching the deranged man fuck an obviously rotting corpse made her vomit whatever her stomach had and traces of it leaked from her mouth despite it being tied with a rag. The sick motherfucker's eyes were closed in passion, oblivious to everything else in the room.

"Don't worry, Tasia," she looked up to see him staring directly at her. "I'll make sure it's just as good for you."

Chapter Twenty

"Ooooh looky, looky, looky! What do we have here?!?" Ryann licked her chops, rubbed her rough, non-manicured, tatted-up hands together, excited to see Tre walk through the front door of Darnisha's apartment holding what appeared to be their big $100,000 pay day.

"Waaddddup fool!" Tre smiled, although he was a bit unsettled to drop a bomb on Ryann. After helping gang'nem with securing a bag by selling off Tasia to some unknown mysterious crazy ass motherfucker, he had the growing itch to renegotiate his fee for essentially doing everything. He wasn't wrong though. And granted he had other ways to make some serious cash – shit a lot more than a lousy ten thousand, the reality was that he needed more to feel like all his time and energy was worth it.

He made his way into the living room, and the first thing his eyes attached to was Darnisha's quiet yet trifling ass, sitting silently on the couch, one hand holding her chin as she used the other to smoke a blunt. To Tre, she was looking like a sweet, succulent and decadent slice of red velvet cheesecake from the Cheesecake Factor. "Wassup, 'Nisha," Tre smiled.

"Sup, Tre…" She responded and smirked back, blowing a plume of smoke out of her nostrils. Although she didn't want to look obviously thirsty for his ass, her pussy was jumping in excitement, getting super-wet and creamy just thinking about Tre. It's crazy too 'cuz since the night she met Tre, every chance she got, she was rubbing her pussy or riding a dildo, thinking about Tre on top of her, sliding his thick dick in and out of her pussy. In fact, even when her and Ryann would get it in, her ass wasn't even thinking about her mate; her ass visualizing Tre pounding her from the back, her ass cheeks clapping like they were in church, his hard dick slaying the shit out of her uterus.

Tre sat down on a couch across from the lesbian couple, then sat the briefcase on the coffee table separating the two couches. He clicked opened the black briefcase. Everyone's shady, greedy eyes were suddenly enslaved to the green crispy benjamins that lined the maroon felt interior of the briefcase. Ryann leaned over, pulled out a few stacks and thumbed through the bills, a massive grin went across

her face, cheek to cheek.

"Ahumm," Tre cleared his throat. "But yo, like for real though, I think we need to talk about my cut."

Ryann's smile turned flat, and she looked at him, more than fucking perplexed. What the fuck he meant by 'we need to talk about my cut,' she wondered. "Fuck is talm'bout bruh? We agreed to ten percent. Which is ten thousand. I'm 'bout to give it to you, buddy."

"You think that's fair? Come on, gang. Yeah, I know I agreed to ten thousand, but let's be honest. I did most of the work. All you bitches did was supply me a body. I put my motherfuckin' job, and shit even my life on the line. I went to Tasia's school. I finessed the principal. Got her ass, went to my guy to find a client, and then had to meet up with that clown ass cracka. Like I said, I know I agreed and shit, but you need to come correct with my cut." Tre demanded, his eyes turned to serious slits. Silence engulfed the entire weed smoke-filled room, and Ryann just sat there, confused and growing angry just hearing Tre make a last-minute demand. A demand that was gonna eat into her bag.

"Man….," she shook her head. "Bro. That's some hoe ass nigga shit for real for real. Besides, you know I've been out the game for years. You the one who still doin' hits. I thought you said you were just doin' this as a favor and shit?!? Come on breh. You bein' kinda disrespectful right now…." Ryann clapped back, not wanting to give in to Tre's desire to renegotiate the price.

Tre shook his head, "Broski, remember – I'm putting myself out there for this shit. Let's say some shit happens, and Tasia escapes. Remember, I'm the one who kidnapped her. I'm the one who sold her off. The first that could get caught up in all this shit is me, and I'd be damned if I'm going to prison over this."

"Fine, what you want? An extra five g's or something?" Ryann fumbled stacks, quickly trying to count out $5,000.

"Nah, I want half…$50,000." he countered.

"Fifty fuckin' thousand dollars!!?!?! Nah, no. No, we ain't goin' for that." Ryann threw her hands up, rapidly shaking her head no. If Tre wanted that much money, he should've found a client who was willing to pay quadruple for Tasia, but seeing as how that didn't happened, in her mind, he needed to be fucking content with the ten thousand he was getting.

"Babe, just give him the cash. $50,000 is more than zero. Come on now, let's stop being greedy," Darnisha interjected as she placed her soft yellow hands on top of Ryann's.

Ryann looked her with a twisted up face. She was about to say something, but then she stopped herself, and thought for a second. She took a deep breath, exhaled and gave in. "Fine, bro. Fine…I'm

only doin' this 'cuz my bitch says so. Next time though, speak up."

"Cool, it's whatever, nigga. Just run me my coins," he laughed, although he was really surprised his longtime buddy didn't understand why he deserved a much bigger cut. Yeah, true, he was still heavy in the dope game, and could've easily made a lot more. But in a situation like this, when the stakes were a lot higher, he felt he needed more just on GP.

He glanced over at Darnisha who was staring him down, biting her lip with a finger in her mouth, still puffing on that blunt. He kind of smiled but then threw his attention over to Ryann who was quickly splitting down the money. Once she got done counting the money, she took Tre's cut, threw it into a small duffle bag and handed it to him.

"What ya'll on tonight?" Tre asked, getting up from his seat with the bag in hand, making his way out towards the door of the apartment.

"Shit, I think we should celebrate. We got a few days left in this raggedy ass apartment anyways! We 'bout to move," Darnisha beamed as her and Ryann got up from their seats and followed behind Tre to the door.

"Well, if ya'll wanna chill or shit, I might be headin' to this kickback later tonight out in Chicago Heights. Hit a nigga up!"

"Bet…" Ryann kind of nonchalantly smiled back as Tre walked out the door. He looked back at Darnisha and smiled, "For real though. Hit me up."

"We will," Darnisha smiled back from afar, somewhat licking her red lipstick covered lips.

Tre then walked off, and Ryann quickly closed the door.

Darnisha, arms folded, walked back to the living room, Ryann following suit.

All of a sudden Ryann pulled out her Glock tucked in her back. BAM! She went across the back of Darnisha's head with handle of the gun. Darnisha instantly collapsed to the ground, clutching in pain, crying, "Wh-whwhyy you did that?!?" she wailed and stammered.

"Bitch, get the fuck up! Get yo dumb ass up now before I go across yo skull again!" Ryann yelled, and then without warning, flew a hard kick into Darnisha's stomach. That shit definitely had to hurt since Ryann was wearing some Timbs, and the way she kicked Darnisha's stomach, you would've thought this butch bitch was a kicker for the Philadelphia Eagles, and she was in the last quarter of the super bowl or some shit.

Still on the ground, grumbling, reeling in so much intense pain that stretched from her head down to the lower pits of her stomach, Darnisha attempted her best to get up. But before she could even get on her knees and make her way on her feet, Ryann stomped her down.

“Come on, bitch! Get the fuck up! You had all that mouth earlier, and now you not sayin’ shit! Bitch I run this shit! GET YO PUNK ASS UP!” Ryann screamed, spittle foaming at the corners of her mouth.

Darnisha, crying uncontrollably, vomited a bloody chunky mix onto the living room floor. Managing to get on her knees, she crawled near one of the den’s sofas, and grabbed one sides to help push herself up off the ground. Once up, she tried to limp away from Ryan’s ultra-violent ass, but the abusive butch “lover” tripped her. Darnisha quickly fell to the floor in the hallway. Ryann then reached down, grabbed Darnisha’s ankles, and began dragging her back into the living room as she protested, screamed and struggled.

Ryann then grabbed the woman by her shirt collar, threw her onto one of the couches, and began to ferociously throw punch after punch to the woman’s face, busting and battering her face. Blood splashed everywhere as Ryann continued to carelessly pulverize Darnisha’s face into an unrecognizable mound of flesh.

With her fists covered in blood, she stopped and stood there, breathing hard, beads of sweat rolling down her face. “Bitch, this the second time you crossed me. I thought yo ass learned the first time. Now I gotta kill a nigga over this shit,” Ryann grimaced as she quivered with rage tinged in words. Her muscles still twitching with raw violence, Ryann had the impulse to just whip out her gun and off Darnisha. Although she had some sweet pussy, Ryann knew she could find something better and controllable. A femme bitch more docile who would know how to stay in her lane . Ryann thought Darnisha would be that way, but as their relationship evolved, she quickly realized Darnisha was the type of bitch who always had to assert herself. Truth be told, the only reason why she was even fuckin’ around with Darnisha in the first place was because her ass was flat out broke, and with all of those “boss bitch moves” Darnisha was supposedly making, or gonna make, she saw it as a golden opportunity to latch onto a bitch who was about to lap in Downtown luxury.

Darnisha, sniffling and crying, was motionless. Her blood and tears blurred her vision, but she could make out that Ryann was hovering over her balled up fists, looking like she was ready to commence round two of the ass whooping.

“You runnin’ you mouth, now we short twenty five-k. You think that’s good money? Bitch that ain’t even enough to buy a damn house.” Ryan growled, trembling.

Darnisha didn’t respond. She just laid there, reeling in so much pain buried all over her body, mostly now in her face. Her nose was broken, her jaw felt like it had been popped out of place.

“Get yo dumb ass up and go clean yo self up, man. And when you get done, bring yo ass back to the living room so you can give me

some head."

"Ok-kk," Darnisha stuttered.

"Nah, you know what, fuck that. I want some head now," Ryann demanded. Next thing you know, the butch bitch unbuckled her pants, slid off her panties, exposing her hairy pussy mound. Butch bitch had so much nappy pussy hair, you could put some Coolio braids in her shit.

Ryann sat down on the couch and spread her legs, "Hurry up, bitch. I'm hungry too!"

Slowly propping herself up from the other couch, Darnisha wiped her sweaty, bloody face and cautiously and fearfully strolled over to Ryann. She got her knees, and without hesitation, Ryann grabbed Darnisha's bloodied head and smothered the woman in her crotch. "Eat that shit bitch. Eat it real good."

Chapter Twenty-One

Days passed…. Tasia counted the days she'd been in this never-ending nightmare – nine days to be exact. Just when she thought she was on the cusp of freedom by having Darnisha arrested and then seeing Tahmir free from false imprisonment, she found herself now in a situation she'd never imagined. Every day, sometime in the afternoon, the mysterious psychotic man would come down the stairwell of what Tasia assumed was the basement of his house. He'd engage in a long daily afternoon routine of having sex with a myriad of dead corpses he had stashed away in the freezer. Tasia took a count of all the different bodies he'd fuck – seven to be exact. Tasia just knew her number was next. He was going to kill her, she just didn't know exactly how. And then like the rest of the corpses, he'd prepare and freeze her body like a raw cow carcass, and have sex with her rotting remains.

Although the man gave her no indication of exactly when he was going to murder her, Tasia knew it had to be sooner rather than later because once he got done with the bodies, he'd throw the rotting corpses in those same wooden boxes Tasia first noticed and incinerate them in a furnace at the tail end of the basement. Seeing the man engage in this daily routine made her very aware the man had this down to a tee, and because he was cremating the corpses, no one would ever pin him as a serial killer. It would be hard to retrieve remains given he was turning the bodies into complete ash. Once their bodies were fully destroyed, he'd spend a good length of time cleaning out the furnace, making sure he left no incriminating evidence.

Before the man would fuck the corpses though, he'd engage in light conversation with Tasia, feed her, bathe her and even give her deep tissue massages. He was buttering her up, doing his best to make her very comfortable and docile to her dreadful fate.

It had to be around midnight. Tasia was bound to a seat. Her hands behind her back were cuffed, and her ankles were also cuffed to the chair. Fortunately, tonight her deranged captor left a tiny lamp on in the room, giving her some light to gaze her surroundings. She had to seize this opportunity to see if she could strategize on liberating

herself. Quickly scanning the room, she desperately searched to see if she could find some sort of device like a screwdriver, knife – shit, some tool she could use to either pick the lock on the handcuffs or maybe even saw away at the metal.

After looking around for minutes, she didn't see shit. Not a damn thing. The only thing she saw she could possibly get her hands on, if even possible given she was handcuffed, were the two bottles of oil her captor religiously massaged into his pale skin and the rotting flesh of the corpses he'd fuck every day. The two bottles were sitting on top of a dresser near the bed she was forced to watch him fuck in. Tasia then spent the next hour or so thinking of the different ways she could use the oil to free herself, but all of the ideas were nothing but pure folly. What could she realistically do with the oil? Slip and slide her way of the handcuffs? Besides, the real dilemma was getting her hands on the bottles in the first place. Seeing how she couldn't come with a sound solution, Tasia lowered her head and just cried, wanting to just give up and accept her fate.

Make the impossible possible, Tasia. She heard Tahmir's deep and wise voice reminding her anything was possible if she put her mind to it. Stop crying girl, you got this, Tasia thought once more, quickly ending her panic and refocusing on coming up with a way to free herself. She quickly scanned the room again, her eyes focusing in on every single thing that could be weaponized or used to get herself out of the handcuffs. Then it hit her – she looked closely at one of the mannequins in the corner of the room and quickly realized it wasn't a true department store mannequin, but rather a headless sewing mannequin. Clothing pins riddled the torso of the mannequin, and she realized that was her solution. If she could manage get her hands on one of those clothing pins, perhaps, just perhaps, she could use it pick the lock on the cuffs.

Quickly trying to figure out how she was going to make her way over to the mannequin, she figured she could use her bodyweight to generate momentum to move herself closer and closer to the corner. "Come on, come on," she mumbled under breath, trying to rock herself towards the mannequin. After a few tries, she couldn't even move an inch. She spent the next hour or so trying to shift her weight closer to the corner, only to do nothing but generate streams of sweat coming down her face and immense frustration. By now she was out of breath and had no more stamina to keep pushing herself closer to the corner. She took a huge sigh and closed her eyes. She gave up. This impossible wasn't going to be possible. She just had to be content with whatever fate was going to come. Whether it meant she'd have another day, or tomorrow would be her last – it is what it is. There was nothing more else she could do.

~

Tomorrow afternoon was here…Tasia sensed at any moment now her psychotic captor would be heading downstairs to jumpstart the "daily festivities". *Breathe in breathe out...Breathe in breathe out...* She focused on the steady rise and fall of her chest, trying her best to control her breathing. It was the only thing she could do in order to stop herself from having a full-on panic attack. Although by now she accepted that her death was for sure inevitable, if there was any glimmering chance of her making it out, she needed to be calm and collective if the opportunity to fight and free herself presented itself.

♪It's been seven hours and fifteen days since you took your love away♪

Tasia's body jumped and quivered at the faint sound of Prince's "Nothing Compares 2U" floating in the basement from another room.

He's coming. She squeezed her eyes tight, trying to erase her fears. She needed to be free, and she hoped this guy would do something reckless that would endow her the chance to fight and run for freedom. The door at the top of the stairwell click opened, and his feet tapped down the steps and to the main floor of the basement. Tears swelling in her eyes, she squeezed them again to get clear vision. Once the man was downstairs, he sauntered deep into Tasia's presence and lip synched the song centimeters from Tasia's face.

♪Nothing compares to you♪

Then without warning, he ripped duct tape from off the girl's mouth

"Please," Tasia begged. "Please, sir, please…Please do not kill me. Please, please let me go home. I won't tell anybody, I won't do anything, just let me leave."

The psycho captor appeared to think about it, stroking her face. His hands then began a slow and thorough creepy exploration of her body as Tasia continued begging him to let her go.

Her eyes widened in fear, taking in his appearance as he tickled her young naked brown body. Then she quickly squeezed her eyes shut not wanting to see what the man was going to do next.

"Darling, please don't cry," he beseeched.

Tasia opened her eyes and met his soulless blue gaze. He smiled at her and licked a single tear from her cheek, then smacked his think pink lips in satisfaction. "You don't have to be afraid my love," he stood upright and began to talk with large sweeping gestures, his excitement barely contained as she stared at him. "I had a dream I was married to a woman with your beautiful brown skin and doe eyes. I sent a request to the universe and here you are!"

He clapped his hands together on the last word and let out a crazed laugh. "So, you see, my sweet girl, I can't let you leave—it's

destiny." He pulled a simple gold band from his pants pocket and slid it onto her finger. "There," he leaned down to kiss her temple, her pulse beating frantically beneath his lips. "Almost ready," he finished.

"Ready for what?" Tasia asked quietly, her throat raw and dry from screaming.

"For our wedding night in eternal Paradise, my love" the man smiled as he slid his hand from her face down to her breasts, squeezing her nipples hard enough for her to cry out.

Ding Dong! Ding Dong! The sound of a door bell ringing made its way down into the basement, suddenly grabbing the man's attention away from Tasia. He looked shocked. Tasia guessed based on his facial expression he was not expecting any company.

"Fuck! Who the fuck is that?" The man quickly searched the basement, looking like he wanted to ensure he didn't leave anything incriminating behind. Once he double-checked the basement, he quickly stormed upstairs, closing the door behind him.

Tasia was frantically breathing, wondering who that was ringing the doorbell. For as long as she was held captive, she never heard a doorbell. Was this the police? Minutes passed, she didn't hear anything from upstairs. Suddenly the door creaked open again.

"…Please man, I swear, I'll pay you your money back! Please sir! I promise!"

"Shut the fuck up! You said that the last time. You must think I'm some dumb ass nigga or somethin'. Just get yo uglazz downstairs. I ain't fuckin' around with you, man." What sounded like a typical hood ass nigga voice echoed down into the basement, raising Tasia's ears. What the fuck was going on? Who was that? A part of her was excited, but also another part of her was filled with dread. If this person saw her, what would he say? What would he do?

Footsteps pounced down the staircase, this time Tasia could her the grumbling of not just one person, but a group of people.

"The fuck!?! Who is she!?!" A medium-height, stocky young nigga with a bald head and a beard looked angry and confused. Standing next to him was another young guy, taller, with dreads down to the bottom of his back. Both guys were dressed casually – True Religion jeans, long white t-shirts, and Jordans. Typical hood nigga wardrobe. Moments earlier Tasia overheard the conversation, and putting two and two together, she realized perhaps the white man was indebted to these niggas.

The bald nigga, holding a large Desert Eagle in his right hand pointed at the white guy, lunged towards the him and grabbed him by the neck. "Who the fuck is she man?!?! Where the fuck you get her from?!?"

The white man, shaking and crying, scrunched his face up in fear.

“I ggggg-ggggot her from th-thh-this other guy out in Chicago,” he answered.

“Chicago?!? Muhfucka, yo ass drove all the way to Chicago for a bitch?!? How much you paid for her?!?”

“$100,000…”

“Muhfucka you paid $100,000 for her and you couldn’t come up with my $25,000?!?!?! Is you fuckin’ kiddin’ me right now?” The bald nigga growled, and now he had the gun fixed on the deranged cracka’s head, ready to pull the trigger and blow his brains everywhere.

“Aye yo shorty, what yo name iz?”

“Ttt-Tasia…”

“Take those fuckin’ handcuffs off her ass! Where the fuckin’ keys at?” The bald dude demanded.

“They're in my pocket…” the white guy cried.

“Ay Smoke, come get these keys and unlock shorty,” the baldheaded guy commanded his sidekick to come uncuff Tasia, finally freeing her from the chair she’d been in for over a week now.

Smoke, the young dreadheaded goon, searched the white guy’s pants pockets and pulled out a pair of keys. Once he finally located what he presumed was a key to the handcuffs, he dashed over to Tasia and uncuffed her from the chair.

“Where her clothes at, you nasty ass cracka?” The baldheaded guy jammed the gun deeper into the white guy’s head.

“They're over there…” he wept.

“Aye shorty, go put some clothes on so we can get you the fuck outta here…” Tasia quickly emerged from her chair, located her outfit and put her clothes on. The baldheaded guy, still pointing the gun at the white guy searched the room, looking for other things. “Where the dope at? And the money?”

“In my safe…”

“What’s the combination, cracka?”

“10-56-11-13”

“Aye Smoke, you heard that? 10-56-11-13…Go get the shit so we can bounce.”

“What we finna do with shorty, Gemini?”

“Aye shorty…Tasia…You said yo name is Tasia, right?

“Yeah,” she replied, standing off to the side, quivering, her arms folded, wondering what was gonna happen next.

“I’m finna show Ms. Tasia here how to knock this cracka’s wig back. You shot a gun before, lil mama?” Gemini laughed, producing this seductively inviting yet evil grin over his face.

“No….Not at all,” Tasia responded as her anxiety heightened once more. She’d never seen a gun before up until this point, let alone

actually handled one.

Smoke ran up the staircase and towards the vault to get the cocaine and money the white guy had stashed away. The white guy was sobbing uncontrollably. He knew his end was near. For Tasia though, the prospect of freedom overwhelmed her.

“Get on yo fuckin’ knees, pussaz cracka.” Gemini ordered. The white guy followed suit, getting on his knees, his back turned towards Gemini.

“Come over here, Ms. Tasia. Come hold this. It’s heavy. Real heavy. This a Desert Eagle. It’s got a powerful recoil. That means this shit gon feel like a bomb exploding in yo hand. But you learn how to hold this shit the right way, you gon be one dangerous ass bitch.”

“Ok,” Tasia slowly nodded as Gemini grabbed Tasia’s hand and helped her secure the gun in both hands. Gemini was completely right – the gun was fucking heavy, and Tasia could tell once she pulled the trigger, the blast was going to knock her off her feet.

“Put that shit close up his head. Now, this nasty ass cracka was about to do some crazy ass shit to you, right? Probably kill you and then fuck you…” He laughed. Although he was unaware that was actually what this psycho motherfucker was planning on doing.

Tasia’s mouth hung open in complete disbelief she was even about to do this. She was silent, mentally blanked out, but quickly remembered Gemini had asked her a question. “Yeah, he was,” she replied back.

“Good. Think about that shit when you blow his shit off, that way you don’t feel guilty. ‘Cuz trust me, the first time you murder someone, even if you think they deserved it, that shit will still haunt you.”

“Ok…” Tasia responded, and her mind instantly went back and reminisced on everything that led her right up to this point. Her abuse at the hands of Darnisha. Being tricked and kidnapped by Detective Speights. Being sold off to what she now realized was a serial killer.

“Pull hammer back…” Gemini instructed. Tasia followed suit, and the click of the hammer echoed in unison with the intensified cries of the white serial killer.

“You ready?” Gemini asked one final time to confirm his seemingly new protégé was prepared to take this cracka serial killer’s life.

“Ye-yyee-yeah,” Tasia stuttered.

“Good, in three seconds, we gon blow his skull back. I’mma countdown. When we get to one, squeeze the trigger as hard you can. Hold the gun as tight you can and flex yo arm muscles cuz that shit gonna recoil, ok?”

“Ok…”

“3…2…1…”

POW! Tasia, slightly prepared, but still somewhat underestimating the power of the blast, fell somewhat off balance as the bullet from gun shattered the serial killer's head all over the place. Blood and speckles of brain matter splattered all over the place, even onto Tasia's face and outfit.

Her mouth hung wide open and dropped down to the ground. The serial killer's body collapsed to the floor, and the massive gunshot wound that exploded off a huge chunk of his skull emptied blood out like lava from a volcano.

As the man lay in a growing pool of his blood, Tasia was seconds away from passing out. Before she could fall to her knees and black out, Gemini grabbed her and slapped her cheeks lightly a couple of times just to make sure she didn't faint, "Aye shorty, it's gonna be alright. I promise you."

Tasia's eyes kind of rolled in the back of her head, but once she regained some semblance of clarity and consciousness, she was back on her feet. Smoke stormed down the basement staircase with a large black duffle bag hanging from his right shoulder. "Shit bro, let's bounce before 5-0 come. You know how these crackas get down in these neighborhoods."

"Let's bounce," Gemini then grabbed Tasia, and the company of three ran upstairs. Once out the basement, Tasia took a quick glance of the house before storming out the front door, realizing all this time her suspicions were correct – she was inside of a massive mansion. The group then stormed outside to a parked champagne BMW 750 iL. Tasia hopped in the backseat along with Smoke. Gemini got in the passenger seat. The driver of the beemer was a black female who looked surprised and angered once her eyes registered Tasia. "Who the fuck is she?!?!" the female driver spat, exposing all her teeth platted in gold. "Man, just drive before we get caught!" Gemini commanded. The female threw the car in reverse, swiftly backed out the drive way and sped off into cold afternoon that was on the precipice of sunset.

Chapter Twenty-Two

"Wh-what hhh-happened to your face?" Jashaun mumbled from his hospital bed, examining his mother's battered face. Even though Darnisha got her ass whooped by Ryan over a week ago, anyone who was familiar with Darnisha's features could easily tell something was off despite the thick coat of make up covering her slender yellow face.

"We got into a car accident a week ago and I wasn't wearin' my seatbelt…" Darnisha lied. Ryann, standing off to the side, closely monitoring the conversation, wanted to make sure her bitch didn't say anything to potentially implicate the butch.

"Ddd-damn, must've bbbe-beeen a bbbad wreck," Jashaun stuttered. Every stammered syllable coming out of Jashaun's mouth was more proof that Jashaun's brain damage wasn't temporary. This shit was most definitely permanent, and Darnisha was solely to blame for his fucked up condition.

"Yeah, yeah it was. Ryann got her car totaled," she lied again. The bullshit lies were rolling off her tongue like lyrics to a Bone Thugs and Harmony song.

"Ya'll datin' or something?" Jashaun asked with a raised brow.

"Nah, she just my friend," the lies continued. "Anyways, we gonna get you home soon and you gon start physical therapy. We gon have you back to one hundred." Darnisha did her best to not make her last statement a lie. Let's just see if she'd hold true to her promise.

Silence grew thick in the room. Jashaun turned his attention the other way, looking annoyed. He just wanted his so-called mother to leave and let him get some sleep. She stroked his arm, and didn't say anything else.

Ryann had her tatted arms folded, her foot tapping against the hospital bedroom floor, looking ready to jet. "Ay, let's bounce. I got work tonight, remember?" She widened her eyes and with a stern look plastered across her face, she gestured her head towards the door.

Darnisha exhaled, "I'll be back up here soon, baby…Ok?"

"Whatever…" Jashaun turned on the television and tuned into a re-run of Flavor of Love.

The guilt-ridden mother plopped herself off the bedside seat and sauntered over to her bae who was ready to get down to business. Tonight Ryann, after much contemplation, made the unfortunate, "executive" decision to off Tre. She had to. Although that was her nigga, and they had known each other now for over twenty years, growing up and banging' in the same set on the South Side, she had to part ways with gang. First, she felt slighted and disrespected that all of a sudden he'd want half her money. Granted, Tasia wasn't her daughter and if anyone had any say so, it would be Darnisha. But Ryann felt she was in too deep. So in her mind, that was HER money. For one, she already had a body on her for helping Darnisha out by killing Big Jaime. She knew Darnisha framed an innocent man. She knew Darnisha had her son raped by a violent savage and suffocated her newborn baby to death. Ryann could've easily said fuck this shit and walked away, but $90,000 was a lot of money to a woman who wanted to start her own record label and become a rapper. She too like Darnisha had her own set of gutter hoe dreams, although she wasn't necessarily a hoe ass bitch like Darnisha's demonic ass.

The pair made their way out of the hospital and to Ryann's devil red Camaro. Once inside, Ryann chucked up the engine, sped out the parking lot and hopped on the e-way.

"That nigga Tre text you back yet?" Ryann asked, wondering if Tre had returned Darnisha's text messages. Ryann knew Darnisha had a "thing" for Tre. She could see it in her eyes – she even knew Tre's dick was jumping up and down for Darnisha. Shit was bound to happen when you messed around with a bitch who wasn't a real lesbian – just a hoe who liked the convenience of getting fucked by anyone when their pussy needed treatment. And knowing Darnisha could use the power of her pussy to lure Tre into a trap, the goal was to invite him over, have a few drinks and blunts and throw that wet pussy on him. In the midst of fucking, the goal was for Ryann to bust out guns blazing and let the stick hit.

Darnisha in any other circumstance would've gladly loved to get some dick from Tre, but because essentially Ryann was using her pussy as bait, she felt cheapened and misused. She never thought in a thousand years her scheming would ultimately lead her to tonight's plan. She was supposed to be in her new apartment already – getting pounded in her king-size mattress by a dope boy or a rapper. But tonight, her ass was gonna be in her all-too-familiar raggedy ass mattress back in the projects, in the potential line of gunfire.

"Yeah, he said he's slidin' through at 10," Darnisha responded to Ryann nonchalantly.

"Cool…You wanna hear somethin' crazy?" Ryann asked, temporarily turning her attention off the expressway and to Darnisha.

"What?"

"Shit, truth be told, I might get off seein' him fuck the shit out of you." she laughed. But Darnisha didn't think it was funny what Ryann just said. She fake chuckled as she massaged her face that still tinged with slight pain.

"Can I ask you a question though?" Darnisha carefully asked.

"What?"

"Why we gotta do all this just to get the bread back? Why we can't just get some niggas or like a stain gang to hit his ass up. You gon murder your own brotha?"

Without warning Ryann cocked her fist back and threw a fake punch at Darnisha, deliberately missing her face. It was a warning shot letting her know not to question her plan. "Ahhh!" Darnisha screamed, and quickly covered her face in an attempt to try to defend herself. Ryann, seeing the sudden fear in her bitch, produced an evil laugh. "Bitch, don't you ever question my plans. This the only way I know how this shit can work. Just do as I say and you won't get fucked up, got it?"

"Got it," Darnisha cried, letting out a small tear.

"Cool…Just think about how you gon ride his dick and shut the fuck up…" Ryan spat as she turned up the bass heavy trap music. Migos' "Slippery" was playing on the radio, and as the tune went into full gear, the butch put her foot on the gas, bobbed her head to the beat and rushed to get the pair back to the far South Side of the city.

~

"…In the trap serving dope with a lot of guns
If a nigga try to rob then you know I'm blowing
Two for ten, on the dope, got my trap boomin'
If the police run in here me and my niggas shootin'
Cook the dope up, dope, cook the dope up,
I bring the mask out if my trap slow up
Cook the dope up, cook the dope up
Drought season turn a half into a whole one
You ain't seen a trap, you ain't a real trapper
To me these niggas actors, you want a brick, I'm taxing
Got fiends they spend their taxes, will disappear like magic
Balling like I'm the Mavericks, all of my niggas savage…"

With Fredo Santana's "Cook The Dope Up" blaring from her iPhone, Ryan was bobbing her head to the satanic sounding beat, getting ready to carry out the most important drill in her hitta career. She was sporting nothing but a white, partly ripped tank top, exposing her full sleeve of tattoos that covered her arms, neck and upper chest.

Her head was platted in thick cornrows, and a mean ass mug was carved into the features of her menacing face. You would've thought this bitch was auditioning to be Cleopatra Sims, Queen Latifa's all-too-real butch character in the movie Set It Off. With a fat ass blunt of some OG Kush dangling from her thick dark purple lips, she was working with great patience and focus to clean her gun and silencer to get ready to off a man who was once her ride-or-die; a nigga she claimed she'd take a bullet for. But ironically now she found herself in a position where she wasn't going to be taking a bullet for him, but giving him a bullet, and plenty of them. In her mind, Tre crossed the line, and because he was now a cop, had clout and knew too much that could fuck her up if shit went downhill, he was a walking liability.

"Bitch, is you ready yet?" Ryann yelled as the song faded to silence from her YouTube player.

"Almost…" Darnisha softly yelled back without sounding annoyed or disrespectful. Darnisha took one last glance in the mirror, making sure her make up and outfit were on point. Once she got done, she exited the bathroom and made her way back out to the living room where Ryann was finishing up. The butch hitta scanned her pussy-bait up and down, making sure she was 100 percent ready to go. "You got on that lace lingerie?" Ryann asked, making sure her bitch had her 'drobe together.

"Of course, just like you said bae," Darnisha confirmed.

"Good, now let's get this party muhfuckin' started." Ryann stood up, brushed ashes off her shirt and made her way towards Darnisha to give her one last glance. She blew a large plume of thick weed smoke out of her nostrils, and then handed Darnisha the blunt. She leaned in and kissed her girl on the cheek then made her way up towards the bedroom and to the closet.

They were expecting Tre any moment now. Darnisha sat down on one of the couches, turned on the TV and adjusted her satin bathrobe so it didn't look wrinkled. Minutes later – KNOCK! KNOCK! Two loud thuds from the apartment's front door echoed throughout the apartment. Darnisha jumped up and dashed towards the door and opened it. Once her eyes saw Tre standing there, her anxiousness departed, and she felt at least this was gonna be the most enjoyable part of the night.

"Waddup…" Darnisha smiled, and let Tre through the door. "Shit, wassup with you?" Tre smirked back, biting his lip, scanning Darnisha up and down. This nigga already knew what time it was the moment he saw the outline of her curvy body through the robe.

"Chillin…Waitin' all damn day for this shit."

"Word…" Tre laughed.

“Yeah, word… Anyways, you want somethin’ to drink? I got some henny, courvoisier, vodka and tequila.”

“Yeah, let me get a shot of some of that Henny. Two cubes of ice…” Tre responded back. Darnisha sashayed her way into the kitchen and made Tre’s drink. Moments later, she emerged into the living room and sat on a couch next to Tre. She handed him his drink. He took gradual sips as he looked Darnisha up and down. “Why you lookin’ at me like that?” She shyly asked.

“’Cuz I knew from the day I saw yo ass, I knew you wasn’t no real ass carpet muncher.” Tre took a sip and put his drink down on the coffee table.

“What you made you think that?” Darnisha asked as she let out a laugh.

“Man, I’ve known Ryann’s crazy ass since I was 9. I know the type of bitches she mess with. You ain’t her type. Maybe for right now you her lil snack, but you were gonna be axed eventually. I can see right through you. You too boss and assertive. Ryann like them overly submissive types who love abusive relationships.”

Darnisha busted out laughing, although it was bittersweet hearing that because she’d never think in a thousand years she’d find herself in the midst of an abusive lesbian relationship with a bitch who was a full-on murderer. Well, Darnisha’s ass was a murderer too, but she felt as though her murder was justified – the byproduct of desperate circumstance. Ryann on the other hand chose a lifestyle of gangbanging and made a career out of killing people.

“Yeah, well, funny you say that because you right. I was about to get rid of her ass anyways. She be doin’ too much.”

“Yeah, like your face?”

Darnisha almost spit her drink out. “What? What you mean?”

“I know she put her hands on you. She can’t help it. She do it to every bitch she fucks with.”

“Hell motherfuckin’ no! Hell no! I’d never let a bitch put her hands on me? Are you fuckin’ kidding me? I got into car accident. That’s why my face look like this.” Darnisha lied.

Tre’s eyes turned to judgmental slits. “Car accident? When?”

“Shit, like over a week ago. My fuckin’ Uber driver slammed in the back of someone and they didn’t have their seatbelt on.” Darnisha lied again. She was already on a roll tonight.

“Damn…” Tre shook his head as if he really believed her. Actually he didn’t. He sensed she was lying. Had to be. He figured something crazy and volatile was going on in their relationship for her to be blowing him up like she was doing earlier. All over some dick. In his mind, there were only two types of bitches that did that – hoes and women looking for an out. In Darnisha’s case, Tre knew the bitch fell

into both categories – probably more. He knew his "friend" more than Darnisha knew her.

But not wanting to focus too much on the domestic abuse, Tre quickly shifted subjects. "Anyways, I hope all that works out for you. I'm sure you'll get somethin' from Uber to pay for your hospital bills and shit."

"Yeah…They helpin' me…"

"Good."

The two chopped it up for another ten minutes, sipping their drinks, talking about random bullshit topics. Just enough lite conversation for the two to warm up to each other. Darnisha told Tre that Ryann was out of town – she'd went to a tattoo artist convention in Washington DC and wouldn't be back for a few days. It was the perfectly convenient lie to try to make Tre feel like he had all the time in the world to dip in her pussy carefree with no concern that Ryann would suddenly pop up and having a fitting rage. Once the two gulped down some more alcohol and smoked two loud packs, the alcohol and weed was sending both of them into a horny frenzy. Next thing you know, words were no longer coming out of their mouths – only moans. Tre was planting wet, succulent kisses all up and down Darnisha's neck. With her reciprocating, she crawled her hand down to his crotch and massaged his growing bulge. The moment her hands cupped his meaty dick, her pink oven went from 0 to 350 degrees in seconds, and she was ready to let that meat slide in her and bake for hours like that shit was a big ass turkey on Thanksgiving Day.

Darnisha stopped momentarily, and stood up. She unlaced her robe, pulled it off, and dropped it to the ground. Tre's mouth dropped at the sight of Darnisha's curvaceous yellow body. With no bra on, the only article of clothing remaining on her body were her lace panties. Tre looked through them and could see her creamy pussy print. With his dick getting harder by the second, he was ready to devour this bitch like he was the fat boy at Willy Wonka's Chocolate Factory.

Instantly grabbing her waist, Tre pulled her centimeters away from his face. Scanning her body up and down, he admired every square inch of her body like she was a divine goddess. He caressed her titties and fiddled her hardened nipples as he licked her navel and kissed her stomach. Then he pulled down her panties to her ankles. She stepped out of them, and he pulled them off the ground and took a huge sniff of them. "Fuckkk," he growled. He loved the smell of fresh pussy juices soaked in some panties. To him it was like going to a steakhouse and smelling the aroma of spices splashed on tender cuts of meat.

Without hesitation, he planted his face deep within her crotch, parted her juicy pussy lips with his tongue, and began to munch on

her pink prawn. Darnisha grabbed his head and began to gyrate her crotch, enjoying every single second of Tre's long, thick tongue massage her clit. Then he did what most niggas failed to do when eating pussy – he puckered his lips around her moist pearl and began to suck away like it was a lollipop. That's how a real nigga is supposed to eat the pussy. Not "lick" but EAT. With pussy juices running down her legs like Niagara Falls, Tre sucked away, quickly making Darnisha cum back to back like none other.

Now Darnisha got more mileage on her pussy than a 1972 Ford Pinto. But with all the guys and women she slept with, none came close to sucking this pussy up like Tre. Once she arrived at her sixth orgasm – the most powerful of them all – her right leg rapidly quivered, "AHHHH! FUCK! FUCK! I'M CUMMING! AHHH SHIT! OH MY GOD!" she screamed. By this point, she didn't give a fuck if Ryann could hear her enjoying the shit out of this pussy eating experience. If she had to put herself in harm's way, she was gonna get something good out of it.

Once Tre was done, he stood up and wiped his bearded face clear of her creamy pussy glaze. You would've thought this nigga had devoured a box of hot and fresh Krispy Kreme donuts. Darnisha grabbed his hand and led the corrupt cop down the hallway and into the master bedroom to begin phase two of tonight's plan. Once inside the bedroom, she helped the shady detective take his clothes off. Darnisha assumed he'd just got off work. He was in the stereotypical police detective uniform; a white dress shirt, navy blue tie and dress pants. Once he had his work clothes off, he stood there with just a tank top and his boxers on, before quickly taking those last remaining items off, revealing a perfectly sculpted African Adonis body, looking like a young, muscular Idris Elba. The moment Darnisha helped him out of his boxers, she nearly shuddered at the sight of his long, ten inch dick that had a matching color tone. His dick head wasn't too big, not too small – the perfect size to penetrate her walls and touch her heavenly g-spot. He didn't have one of those big nasty meaty dicks. It was the perfect dick to match a man with a perfect body. She instantly got down on her knees, and without even asking, she stuffed his entire shaft down her throat, letting his meat marinate for a good ten seconds before pulling it out, covering the entire veiny shaft with her thick, viscous saliva. "Ahhhh fuck," he moaned as he felt the tip of her tongue circle around his dickhead, licking the hole. Precum oozed from his tip. So much precum that it was gonna be the perfect lube to oil up her already nasty wet pussy cave.

Seeing how much Tre was enjoying the head, she cupped his ass cheeks in her palms, and pushed his crotch and dick forward, shoving his dick once again down her throat, but this time deeper, damn near

choking herself. She wanted to give this man the nastiest head he'd ever experience in life, and do it right in front of Ryann's full view. She hoped by now Ryann was enraged, filled with fumes, seeing her suck that dick like it was going out of style. Bringing Tre almost to the cusp of blasting his thick nut all over the place, she stopped, stood up and plopped herself onto the bed, ass tooted up in the air for her pussy entrance to be right in Tre's view.

And it was perfect – because out of all the sex positions, Tre loved him some doggy style. There was nothing like hitting some wet pussy from the back. Seeing her arch her back and toot that thang up in the air, his dick instantly caught the holy ghost, jumping all over the place in holy excitement like Shirley Caesar laid hands on it. HOLD MY MULE WHILE I SHOUT! The way his dick was fluttering at that sight of that fat pwussy, you would've thought his dick was singing, "LOOK! I got beans, greens, potatoes, tomatoes, lambs, rams, hogs, dogs, YOU NAME IT!"

Tre without thinking, not even wanting to put a rubber on to protect himself against STDs or even a baby, plopped his meat on the surface of her creamy coochie and slapped it a few times just to see if that monkey was ready. He hawked up some saliva, drooled the spit down to his dick, making sure he could make this shit very nasty and pussylicious. Then he entered her, her walls easily conforming to the girth of his dick. It's crazy too because Darnisha had a notoriety for having some Hurricane Harvey-damaged pussy walls. But tonight, lil mama snapped that thang and turned her shit into some octopussy. Tonight her walls were like deep blue sea creature tentacles pulling Tre more and more inside of her as he glided in and out of her.

Tre upped his motion and began to ferociously pound that punanny, giving it the most vicious fuck it had ever experienced. Darnisha was loving every single second. This dick was working magic on her soul, had this bitch almost ready to give her life to God. As he worked that pussy, he looked down and could see Darnisha was cumming back to back on his dick as a thick coat of her cream lathered his shit up. The deeper he dug into her, the more she squeezed his meat, making him wanting to cum any second.

He slapped her ass hard, leaving a visible red handprint. "YESSS! FUCK ME! FUCK ME HARDER ZADDY!" she yelled. Tre, following the seductive command, gave another slap to her yellow ass. The two went at for a few more minutes before Tre busted all inside her gooey guts. "AHHH! AHHHHHHH!" he groaned out loud , probably waking up sleeping grandmothers. He collapsed to the bed, Darnisha still under him, and kept going as his cum, her pussy juices and their sweat splashed all over the place like they were on a water ride at Universal Studios. This nigga wasn't the typical minuteman and didn't

need to recharge to go at it again. His big black nuts were filled to capacity and truth be told, he could go at for hours…and he was planning too.

The two kept at it and at it, and from behind the closet, Ryann was getting antsy and ready for these fuckbirds to end their fuckery so she could hit this nigga and move the fuck on with life. By this point, a good forty five minutes later, Darnisha now found herself on top of Tre, riding his dick like she was a muhfuckin' Ruff Ryder. This trifling bitch was gonna make sure she got as many nuts as possible out of Tre before Ryan bust her crazy ass through the closet and upped the blicky on the unaware pussyholic.

Finally, after about a good hour and a half, and Ryann now ready to bust a move, the two concluded their fucking. Darnisha hopped off the dick, and collapsed to the left side of the bed, away from the closet. She did this purposefully to ensure Ryann had the perfect shot at Tre whose back was facing the closet as he cuddled Darnisha. Tre, holding Darnisha tight in his muscular embrace, caressed her body as he kissed the back of her neck and upper back. She felt a tad bittersweet that this dream would now devolve into a nightmare for him – and really a nightmare for her because she'd go back to being enslaved to Ryann's ultra-violent bipolar abuse.

"Ahh! Fuck! Ahhhh! Ahhhhh! Fuck!" Tre suddenly grabbed his right elbow. Darnisha rolled over and looked at him, and instantly became fearful.

"Wh-what's wrong?" Darnisha stammered, looking at Tre continue to grab his arm, wailing in pain.

"I h-hhahave arthritis…I got rheumatoid arthritis. I nnn-need my medicine," Tre stuttered in pain, and Darnisha, by the scrunched up look on Tre's face, became instantly worried about Tre's sudden ill condition.

"Where is it?" she said as she got up off the bed and lunged towards his pile of clothes and gun holster. She picked up all his belongings in one swoop and walked them over to him. He fumbled through his pants as Darnisha quickly became concerned about what was about to happen next. What in the fuck was Ryann waiting for?

Ryann on the other side was stumbling, trying to come up with an alternative because she didn't expect this to happen, and Darnisha's dumb ass was standing in her perfect line of shot.

"Ahhh! AHHHHH!" Tre screamed louder and fell to the bed with his clothes in his lap. He really looked like he was in the most intense pain of his life. Without anyone really noticing, he slid his hand over his gun, quickly whipped it out of its holster, and without thinking for a millisecond, he stood up with lightning speed – POW! POW! POW! POW! POW! POW! POW! POW! POW! POW!

“Ahhhhhhh!” Darnisha fell to the ground as the blasting sound of gunshots rang out from Tre’s pistol, straight into the closet where he knew all along Ryann was hiding. Suddenly the shot up white closet door sprung open, and Ryann emerged with bullet holes riddled all throughout her torso and abdomen. Clutching her chest, her face twisted up in surprise and pain, then she slumped to the ground, face down. Within seconds, her blood pooled out from her sides, staining the bedroom’s carpet.

Tre then pointed the gun down at Darnisha. “Get the fuck up… Come on, man! Get the fuck up!” he commanded, serious to blow his last two round rights right into the back of her head. She shook and cried aloud, shocked that he had the sixth sense to know all along he was being set up.

Darnisha slowly stood up, crying, her make up ruined, and the abuse she suffered under Ryann became visible now more than ever. Still pointing the gun at Darnisha, Tre walked over to a motionless Ryann, slipped two fingers under her neck to check for a pulse. “She’s dead,” Tre muttered.

“You could’ve been dead too. But that juicy pussy of yours saved you…”

~

1:32 AM. Hundreds of blue police lights flashed throughout the entire housing project. Outside, at least forty cop cars surrounded the entire building as a growing crowd of onlookers formed outside in the midnight cold, wandering why there was an battalion of cops in the projects. Usually for a murder, residents expected there to be a small squad of cop cars surrounding the area, but from the look of it, tonight, rather this early morning, they all knew something bigger had to happened. Moments later, paramedics walked Ryann’s shrouded body down the staircase of the apartment in a stretcher and escorted it to the back of a white Cook County Medical Examiner’s van.

Inside Darnisha’s apartment, at least thirty cops swarmed the inside of the unit, collecting as much evidence as possible in what was now an active crime scene. Darnisha sat on the edge of her bed, quivering, looking like she had not slept in months. Tre on the other hand, looking fucking confident and brazen, was answering a plethora of questions being thrown at him ironically by his very own coworkers. The questions however, were procedural, and they weren’t serious given Tre was one of them, and based on the story he gave them, they already had their minds made up to close the case before an investigation even started. Once the police collected all they needed, the crowd outside died down, and Tre and Darnisha found

themselves alone in the apartment.

"You can stay with me tonight, if you like…" Tre offered, showing slight concern for Darnisha. She looked over at him, her eyes puffy and dark, "I-II-I don't know. I don't think that's a good idea."

"You sure?" Tre offered once more.

Darnisha stared at him in silence, and seriously thought about his offer. "Ok… But just for a night," she replied.

"Cool…I got plenty of space back at my crib. You'll love it too. It's your style." He then reached his hand out, and helped Darnisha out of the bed she had been sitting on for hours now, not moving, still in shock of how everything turned out. A part of her was relieved, but another part of her was terrified. What would the future hold? She already had a part of her original boss bitch plan ruined by Tahmir. Just when she thought she was back in the full swing of things, Ryann switched it up on her and showed another side she hadn't seen up until a few weeks ago. And now that Tre came into her life, he threw her another monkey wrench. Once up, she rummaged her room, packed a suitcase of her belongings, and the two of them made their way out of the apartment and to his truck.

Once they hopped on the e-way, Tre looked over at Darnisha, "You hungry?"

"Yeah, kinda…"

"Me too…anything in particular you like?"

"Not really. I'm not that picky." Darnisha, still mortified, replied, her eyes staring outside of the passenger window.

"Cool, I'll just go to White Palace. It's right around the corner from my loft anyways. I stay in South Loop."

Hearing those three words – loft, and South Loop, quickly changed Darnisha's disposition. Tre had money, and maybe the universe was now truly working in her favor, she thought. Yeah buddy, she found the one. Turning her attention to Tre, "So, how'd you know?"

"How did I know what?"

"That she was gonna kill you?"

"Hahahah. Like I said, I've known her, rather knew her, for over twenty years. Some things about people never change. You can't teach an old dog new tricks. Ryann always loved that pulling that trick out of her hat when it came to doing hits. That's the reason why her dumb ass got caught the first time and went to prison. She should've just left it alone then. You'd think she would've learned."

"Wow," was all Darnisha could say. "Fucking incredible."

Her pussy was warming up. If he offered, she was willing to jump on the dick again, despite just witnessing her lover just get snuffed out by her so-called best friend. Tragic, but liberating.

Chapter Twenty-Three

"You not gon eat?" Gemini looked at a shy, quiet, and scared Tasia, sitting at the far end of the 24-hour diner booth, looking out of the restaurant's window.

She didn't say anything in response. She just remained quiet as she slowly traced her fork over her full platter breakfast – grits, eggs, bacon, pancakes, sausage links and hash browns. A breakfast she wouldn't dare eat given she was still so much serious about her healthy diet.

Although she had not eaten a real meal damn near in two weeks now, looking outside at the unfamiliar mountainous desert made her lose her appetite. When she assumed she had been kidnapped and sold off to someone in Chicago, by the looks of outside, she knew she wasn't even in Illinois. Her captor had brought her all the way to the center of New Mexico – Albuquerque to be exact. How'd she know? Gemini, Smoke and Joseline told her so.

Since being rescued by Gemini and Smoke, Tasia somewhat reverted back to her old self. The trauma of the entire ordeal stamped out of her the fighting, warrior spirit Tahmir put into her.

"Does she even really talk? Is she like retarded or something?" Joseline asked as she spread butter and grape jam on her toast.

"Man, she talk. She just still kind of fucked up. Damn, what did that white motherfucker do to you? All this time I just thought that clown ass cracka was a coke addict. I didn't know he had a thing for kidnapping young bitches…" Gemini barked as he stuffed buttery corn grits in his mouth.

Gemini, Smoke and Joseline were a group of young contract killers, and they were hired by a mob boss in Houston to retrieve $25,000 owed to him by Tasia's apparent captor and potential killer. The three unassuming group of street assassins looked like average, ordinary hood niggas, but an attentive and hyper-aware Tasia quickly understood from their detailed conversation that she wasn't in the company of usuals. These were straight up bonafide killers, and Tasia had absolutely no idea what they were going to do to her.

That was partly one reason why Tasia didn't open her mouth since

hopping in the backseat of the beemer. They just treated her like she was a part of the team, and since she was forced to blow the serial killer's head off, she wanted no parts of being on team since murder was the sport they played.

Sensing Tasia wasn't going to open her mouth, let alone eat her food, Smoke reached across the table and grabbed the plate in front of Tasia. Temporarily breaking her distraction, she looked at Smoke with scorn and then slapped his hand. "I was gonna eat, you can put it back down…"

"Oh so NOOOW you wanna talk," Gemini laughed. "I knew eventually you'd say something. Besides, you a thick girl. You look like you can eat," he continued laughing.

"Not funny." she replied back as she forked through her food, not giving anyone eye attention.

"Damn girl, for a bitch we just helped, you sure got some muhfuckin' attitude. We should drop yo ass off back at buddy's place," Joseline spat, rolling her eyes.

"Aye, come on, JoJo, lighten up a bit. She been through a lot. I'm sorry Tasia. Anyways, where you from?"

"Chicago…"

"Oh word?!? I got kinfolk in Chicago. West side to be exact. What part you from?"

"The South Side!" Gemini exclaimed.

"SOUTH SIIIIDEEEE!" Smoke joked, mimicking a stereotypical LA accent, not Chicago.

Tasia, unfazed by the joking, just continued to fork through the greasy, acid reflux causing breakfast food on the plate. The table got silent again as everyone returned to eating. Moments later, Tasia looked up at Gemini, who apparently had to be the leader of the group, "I just don't know how I'm gonna get back home. What are you all gonna do to me?"

"What you mean you don't know how you gonna get back home?" Gemini scrunched his face up in confusion. "Do to you? Hah! We gotta take yo ass back home! You can't roll with us like that. You a youngin…" he explained, finishing up his side bowl of grits. "That's unless of course you do wanna hang…"

"Nah, I'm good. I can just go back home."

"Wait, wait, wait one muhfuckin' minute. We gon drive this girl all the way back to Chicago? Nigga is you crazy?" Joseline protested, rolling her neck, letting everyone at the table instantly know she wasn't game for the long road trip.

"Why not? It ain't that far from Houston…" Gemini spread butter on his pancakes, and once he got done slicing them up into four triangles, he stuffed a mound in his mouth. "Besides, it's probably

some work in the Chi anyways we could pick. Tasia, you know any bosses who need hittas?" he laughingly asked.

She didn't respond. She was just more so focused on getting back home, and if Gemini seemed to offer to drive her back, she was game. Either way, she needed to get back home.

"Anyways, look. If ya'll don't wanna go with me to Chicago, that's fine. Ya'll can stay ya'll asses back in H-town, but when I get that link and I hit a mill, don't be callin' me asking me if you can hold a dub or some shit. 'Cuz I ain't gon have it," he joked, exposing his straight white teeth. Although Gemini looked older, he actually wasn't. Tasia quickly determined that he had to be no older than 25, and more than likely Joseline and Smoke were around the same age.

Although she was scared and fearful of what tomorrow would bring, she couldn't resist but to find Gemini attractive. Although she wasn't too amused with his constant jokes, this was the first time ever she looked at a man a certain way. She quickly ended though her light sexual urge, tucked them in the back of her mind and focused back on how she was gonna get her ass back to Chicago.

"How long do you think it'll take for us to get to Chicago?"

"Probably a good four days or somethin' like that. But we gotta make stops along the way. You just be patient, go along for the ride. You might learn a thing or two, ok?" Gemini did his best to assure he wasn't bullshitting her and that he was going to get her back to her native city.

At this point Tasia had no other choice but to take his word as bond and believe in less than week, she'd be back in the Chi, back to her "normal" life. Sensing things were gonna be alright, she squeezed the old Tasia out and brought back the confident, and self-believing Tasia.

~

4:01 AM. "Aye yo, Tasia. Tasia! Wake up, we gotta bounce!" Joseline shouted, commanding her out of her deep sleep. Rubbing the crust out of her hazy eyes, Tasia wondered why Joseline was in such a panic, scrimmaging around the room, throwing all her clothes back into her carry-on suitcase.

"BUST A MOVE! LET'S GO UNLESS YOU WANNA DIE!" Hearing that word snapped Tasia into full consciousness, and she sped out of the hard twin-size Holiday Inn bed, quickly put her shoes on awaited her next set of instructions from Joseline. "What's going on? What's happening?" Tasia asked with caution. By the way JoJo was moving, all packed up now, ready to exit, JoJo searched the room one last time. Then JoJo pulled her Glock out of her back, and as she carried

her suitcase by the side handle, she gestured silently to Tasia to move quickly to the hotel room door.

"On my count, when I say go, open the door and run down the hallway as fast you can, I'll be behind you just to cover you…" JoJo muttered, looking Tasia seriously in her eyes. Whatever was about to happened heightened Tasia to extreme paranoia. Someone had to be looking for the team, and whoever it was, found them and was about to execute them. "Ok, one, two, three – GO!" Suddenly Tasia flung the door wide open, and without even bothering to look back to see what was going on, she sprinted down the long dimly lit hallway. JoJo, who was tall and slender, and looked in shape, took off running behind Tasia.

"There she is!" A loud raspy voice screamed down the opposite end of the hallway. POW! POW! POW! POW! Shots rang out in Tasia's direction and before she could even figure out what was going on, JoJo snatched the girl like a phantom ghost off to the side and tucked her behind a column near a random hotel room door. "STAY HERE!" Joseline commanded and more shots rang out down the hall. One bullet flew by, almost hitting Joseline. Luckily she managed to duck back.

JoJo breathing hard as hell, waves of sweat coming down her light brown forehead, she held the gun up, and took a mental count. Five seconds later – "AHHHH!" POW! POW! POW! POW! She let the shots go, and instantly Tasia could hear men groan out in pain. JoJo hit her target and then ducked back behind the wall for cover with Tasia. She then rapidly knocked on the hotel room door, hoping someone would answer. Seconds later, an old, half sleep white man with a massive potbelly, wearing nothing but a yellowish wife beater and some polka dot boxers and black dress socks, looking like he was 18 months pregnant, opened the door and looked the girls up and down. "Whadya want?!?" he grimaced, sounding like some old rusty detective from some black and white throwback 1950s crime drama. But once his beady wrinkled eyes registered a frantic JoJo holding a pistol, he attempted to slam the door close. But before he could close the door all the way, JoJo pushed her way through , grabbing Tasia with her.

"Ahhh! Ahhhh! No! No!" An obviously tall, hairy tranny prostitute wearing a huge blonde Dolly Parton wig, a non-fitting red bra and a matching thong yelled in her-his deep voice, doing her best to cover herself up in the bed sheets not to expose him-herself. Under any other circumstance JoJo would've laughed and then probably would've shot the he-she; she was a rabid homophobe and transphobe. But knowing her and Tasia's life was in immediate danger, the room became temporary asylum until the two women could figure out what

they needed to do next. More gun shots let down the hallway, and the two girls could hear dark voices, voices that sounded like they belonged to Gemini and Smoke. More gunfire erupted down the hallway, and old fat white John and his tranny lover huddled themselves in the covers of the bed, scared as shit. “What’s goin’ on out there?” The old white man hurriedly asked, looking like he was gonna release diarrhea all over the bed. Shit, he probably would’ve shitted himself anyways if he was letting the tranny dig in his old, stretched out 75-year old asshole.

“Drug war…”

The old man didn’t respond. He just buried himself deeper into the comfort of the transsexual who petted him as if he was the bitch in the odd sexual relationship.

Seconds later, JoJo’s iPhone rang. It was Gemini.

“AYE YO! I’M DOWNSTAIRS ALREADY! WE GOTTA BOUNCE! SMOKE IS SHOT AND I DON’T THINK HE GON MAKE IT!” Gemini yelled through the speaker phone.

“FUCK!” JoJo screamed. “Tasia, remember when Gemini taught you how to use a gun?”

Tasia nervously shook her head in agreement as her eyes formed tears. She just knew this was gonna be her end. Ain’t no way in the hell they were gonna make it out of alive.

“Good, ‘cuz you gon need to learn how to use those skills, baby girl. Remember, just hold your ground, anticipate the recoil, squeeze and fire. Aim. Aim. Aim. This shit is not a video game. This is real fuckin’ life. Is you ready?”

“Yeah,” Tasia mumbled. Within seconds, JoJo zipped her suitcase opened, pulled out a small nine millimeter – the perfect pistol, packed with a lot of power that even a novice young woman like Tasia could handle. JoJo loaded the pistol, handed it to Tasia and looked her, “If I don’t make it, just keep going downstairs, ok?” Just keep going. Don’t worry ‘bout me. And I know these last two days I’ve been a bitch to you, but just know I fuck with you shorty. You’re a real G. Be a better woman than me. Don’t make this your life. Ok?”

Tasia just nodded her head, scrunching up her face, wanting to cry. JoJo briefly twisted her face up too, getting emotional, because she quickly had to prepare herself for the possibility of death. A tear fell from her eye and she wiped it away. Seeing few tears fall from Tasia’s eyes, she reached in, wiped her tears away and hugged her. But not even milliseconds later, she stomped all emotions out of her core and quickly reverted back to the ruthless, heartless street assassin she was. Her face turned nonchalant – ready to kill, ready to die. “Ready boo?”

“Ready…” Tasia said back nonchalantly. “Good…” JoJo then spun on her feet, looked at the old man and the tranny prostitute, “Thank

yall for the four and half minute hospitality. Seasons greetings." With that JoJo stormed the door, Tasia following her. "On my count, one… two…three." JoJo opened the door, and Tasia flew out first, sprinting down the hall.

"GO! GO! GO! Tasia! GO!" JoJo screamed, with her sprinting right behind her.

POW! POW! POW! POW! More shots let out from a semi-auto down the hall. JoJo turned and delivered some shots.

Almost towards the elevators, Tasia used all her leg power to get down to the last stretch. More shots let out. POW! POW! POW! POW!

"Ahhh!" Tasia turned on her feet and saw JoJo on the ground, motionless. Then she quickly saw down the hall way the active shooter who was aiming to gun her down.

"AHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHH!" POW! POW! POW! *Make the impossible possible.* With JoJo gone, you'd thought her killer spirit quickly left her body and entered Tasia. The young teen let out shots. Ducking and weaving as the man at the other end let more shots fly her way. Tasia returned gun fire, coming close to getting a few times. She was going to survive. She took one final peer out into the hallway – perfect. The man was unprepared. POW! POW! POW! POW! POW! POW! POW!

He fell to the ground as Tasia delivered execution from the hammer in her hand. She ran back down the hallway to check on Joseline, only to see her body lay in a pool of thick crimson blood. Her mouth dropped and her brown eyes wide open, staring to no where particular, Tasia didn't even bother. She grabbed JoJo's suitcase and made her way to the fire exit staircase. Quickly sprint down the steps, she blasted through the back, frantically searching for Gemini's BMW. She went back into a full sprint, looking like FloJo in the '88 Olympics, making her way to the beemer and hopped in the back.

"Where's JoJo?!?!" Gemini screamed.

"She's dead!" Tasia yelled back.

"FUCK! FUCK! FUCK!" He cried as he sped out the parking lot of the hotel, off into the early morning.

Smoke, in the passenger seat, seemed damn near lifeless as he wailed in pain. Twenty minutes into the Tasia, along with the remaining crew of the "team" were on the empty expressway going at least one hundred miles per hour. "Hang in there bro! Hang in there!" Gemini pleaded with Smoke, begging him not to go into the light.

"It's aiight bro. You can do this shit without me. I'm…I'm sleepy."

"No! NO! Keep your eyes open, bro! KEEP EM OPEN!" Gemini cried, rapidly switching his attention back and forth between the dark, fog covered New Mexico expressway and the dying Smoke.

Smoke didn't respond. Moments later, Gemini extended his right hand towards Smoke's neck and checked for a pulse. He was gone. Gemini shook his head and sobbed. Tasia looked out the window into the dark, foggy road, hoping they were close to safety. About ten minutes later, blinding blue and red lights emanating from the top of a highway patrol car filled the beemer. "FUCK! FUCK! FUCK!" Gemini growled as he slowed down the luxury sedan and pulled over to the side of the road.

"What's goin' on?!?" Tasia anxiously asked.

"Shit, I think he got me for speeding! FUCK!" Gemini barked. Moments later, a big burly cracka, wearing a black New Mexico Highway Patrol uniform, holding a flash light, peered into the tinted window of the BMW, looking directly at Gemini.

"Roll down your window, sir" the officer barked, still flashing the light directly into the window. "You good, Tasia?"

"I-I-II think…" she responded, scared as shit as to what was going to happen next.

Gemini rolled down his window. The officer didn't say shit other than flash the light into Gemini's face and then he flashed the light over Smoke's lifeless body. Once he made out the visible gunshot wounds riddled all in Smoke's body, his eyes turned to slits. Then he flashed the light in the backseat of the car and saw Tasia, quiet and stiff.

"10-4 – I need back up…"

Chapter Twenty-Four

"What's going on here?" What's wrong with him?"

"Sir, we really need to get to the hospital! Please, my friend is dying!" Gemini cried, although he was sounding a bit disingenuous.

"Is he breathing? Why does he have all those gunshots?" The officer looked closely into the car and then back at Tasia. "Who is she? How old are you?"

"16…" Tasia promptly answered.

"We were comin' from a bar and there was a massive shootout between these Mexican gangs!" Gemini lied, doing his best to come up with some sort of reasonable story. Regardless of the outcome, Gemini knew the story was bullshit, but he was trying to buy himself enough time to kill this crack ass cop and keep it moving on the e-way.

"Step out the vehicle, sir?" The officer didn't seem convinced the story. Gemini mumbled under his breath, quickly looked back at Tasia, his eyes turning to slits suggesting perhaps, just perhaps she should intervene.

Tasia didn't know how to respond. Had JoJo been in the car though, she would've known what to do. Her next move would've been to figure out a way how to deflect the cop, and then if necessary, up a blicky on the pig and end his life so they could keep business moving. But Gemini knew Tasia was more than a just a rookie – she was a young girl caught up in an unfortunate situation and she wouldn't have the street smarts or the assassin's intuition to know how to bust the right moves.

Gemini proceeded to get out of the car. Following standard protocol, the patrol officer told Gemini, "Put your hands behind your back. Do you have any guns?"

Gemini answered, "No, sir."

The officer continued to pat him down, trying his best to quickly search for guns and drugs, but to no avail he didn't find anything immediately on Gemini. Of course not. He wasn't a dumb criminal. No matter the situation, Gemini knew to put his weapons back into their secret, automated hidden compartments to avoid precarious situations like this.

Seconds later, the officer detached his radio from his shirt, “10-4. Call off back up. No need. I do have a juvenile though.”

Gemini’s ears raised in anticipation of what was about to happen next. The officer called off back up. Here Gemini was a black man stranded in the middle of the New Mexico desert. This cracka ass cop had ulterior motives. He didn’t find any dope or guns on Gemini. He made mention of finding a juvenile, but didn’t bother to mention the dead suspect in the front passenger seat, let alone the main suspect – Gemini.

Without warning Gemini took off running, attempting to make his into the deep cover of the vast, dark, foggy field off to the side of the road. But without hesitation the patrol officer pulled out his service weapon and let rounds go, instantly striking Gemini in his back before he could make it too far and out of sight. A loud thud hit the ground, and the officer dashed into the deep field looking for Gemini’s hopefully immobilized body. “Fuck! Fucking nigger,” the tall, portly older officer growled as he tried his best to scan the field, looking for any sign of Gemini. He swore he hit the man in his back with his bullets given he heard his body drop to the ground. But like a ghost, Gemini was able to run off into the piercing morning darkness, leaving behind Tasia all by her lonesome and Smoke’s rotting shot up body.

The officer walked back over to the BMW, tucked his gun in his holster, and opened the back passenger door, letting Tasia out. “You have any guns or dope on you, young lady?” the officer asked. Tasia adamantly shook her head no.

“Good, put your hands behind your back. You’re comin’ with me,” he said as she slapped cuffs on her wrists.

~

“Whadya think? She ain’t no Mexican. She just a regular ole nigger girl…” the highway patrolman asked another officer, not a highway patrolman. This officer was the chief of police for the town of Nadine, New Mexico.

“Hrrrm,” the old white man with a scruffy white beard and head full of white hair thought long and hard about what he wanted to do with Tasia. The two had her locked away in a small jail cell inside the town’s police station. Nadine was a border town between New Mexico and Texas, and with a population of less than 500, this was the only jail cell used to detail criminals.

The highway patrol and the chief of police were strategizing on what they wanted to do with their next prized possession. It was a rare thing to find a black girl on their highways, and it opened many options they could explore to make some good cash.

Nadine was one of those old, decrepit ghost towns off in the middle of Nowhere, USA and police departments like this despite being comprised of what you'd assume were good, upstanding and honorable Christian white folk were corrupt as they come – worse than police in cities like Chicago or NYC. Little ass towns like Nadine had virtually little oversight – mainly because they were smaller than an ant mound. No one would assume, not even the highest levels of government, that a town like Nadine could or would be dirty, but it goddamn it was. What fueled Nadine's corruption was that it was a gateway city in a known dope smuggling state. Mexican cartels funneled drugs, plantation workers, sex slaves, guns and other shit through states like Arizona, New Mexico and Texas since they touched the Mexican border. These small ass cracka towns and their cracka ass police forces knew billions were flowing through highways, and they wanted in on the pie. Shit, think about it. An old cop in one of these towns, even the chief of police, made no more than $45,000 a year. Good livin' if all you wanna do is go to the local tavern, bowling alley, church or to the ice cream parlor. And if you were lucky enough, you could save up, drive into Mexico and get you some young Latina pussy for a hundred pesos, which was like $10. But after a while, cheap liquor, ice cream, and cheap Mexican pussy gets tiring and these cops want to rake in the big bucks. When retirement is around the corner, a condo in Miami or Las Vegas seemed a lot more appealing than dying in Nadine, New Mexico.

"You think Jose'nem would like to buy her?" the patrolman asked. He was referring to a known drug trafficker who they occasionally did business with.

"Hell no. Mexicans don't like niggers." The chief of police spat back. He was right though…to an extent. The drug cartels that delved in sex trafficking wanted white and European bitches, not "Negras Americanas".

"I'm thinkin' a better idea is to charge her as a smuggler for some black gang like the crips or bloods from California, and then get Judge Blakely over in Tampico County to try her. That way we can at least hit our numbers for the grant. And we can get some kickback from Tarver." The chief of police figured it all out. His idea now was to plant dope that didn't belong to Tasia at all on her, and charge her with intent to distribute narcotics across state lines. Since that was a federal crime, Tampico County, which Nadine was a part of, could continue to get grant money from the DEA to fight the "war on drugs". The more people they arrest, the more money they can get from the Feds. And then even better, once Tasia was indicted and found guilty, they were going to ship her off to one of New Mexico's privatized prisons and in exchange get a bribe from Director Hinks,

the head of the prison. He had his numbers to meet too since the private prisons made more money when they had more bodies. All of this was a perfect plan to make money one way or another off a young, ignorant black girl who didn't realize how these crackers were conspiring to ruthlessly charge her with a crime she didn't commit just to ultimately make a few stacks.

"What about the other niggers? Where are they?" the chief of police asked the highway patrolman.

"One of them is dead. We got his body. The other…Well, he took off before we could apprehend him." The highway patrolman explained.

"God damn it…That would've been more money…Oh well. Let me go hear what the nigger in there has to say. I'll prepare a typed confession, and once I get her personal info, I'll fill in the rest and file the charges ASAP. Thanks bud. Good police work…"

~

"What's your full name young lady?" Chief Cummings asked, sitting directly across an interrogation table.

"Tasia Courtney Johnson…"

Chief Cummings took a puff from his pipe, looking the girl up and down.

"And where are you from?"

"Chicago…"

"Chicago??? How in the hell you'd end up all the way in New Mexico? You sure you're not from Compton, California?" The chief smiled, and blew out a plume of smoke from his pipe.

Tasia had no idea what the man was even fucking talking about. Compton?!?

"No sir. I've never even been to California. Please I can explain," but before Tasia could finish her sentence, the chief smiled, "You sure your name isn't Latrice Hankerson…Born 2001 in Compton, California? Affiliated with the Piru Blood Gang set?"

Tasia twisted her face up in absolute confusion. Was this all one big mix up? She had no idea what the man was talking about and went into correct him, "No sir, My name is Ta—"

"I've heard enough young lady. Do you realize that BMW we pulled over has registered plates in California. Not Illinois. Also, we found a kilo of cocaine in that suitcase you were carrying. Are you sure you aren't from Compton, California?"

"No sir, see I can—"

"Let's just agree to disagree. Sign your John Hancock right here…"

Tasia's novice legal acumen kicked in. She looked at the piece of

paper that was before her. She quickly scanned the text, and realized she was being charged with four counts of smuggling drugs across state lines. Since had no form of ID on her, it was hard to prove her true identity. The chief claimed her name was Latrice Hankerson, something she assumed he had to have made up. Butterflies grew in the pits of her stomach as she pushed the paper back and nodded her head no. “I actually will not sign that, sir. Before I say anything else, I request I speak to m—”

SLAP! The officer slapped Tasia hard in her face. “Sign it, bitch. Or there’s more of that coming.”

Tasia clutched her face in shock and disbelief and the stinging pain spread through her left side of her face. Tears began to form in the corners of her eyes. “NN-nn-no,” she stuttered. What in the fuck was really going on?!?

With her refusal, this time the Chief balled up his fist and socked Tasia right in her jaw. The brutish force coming from his body weight transfer into hand, instantly causing her jaw to pop out of place, and she fell down to the ground, handcuffs preventing her from utilizing her hands to get up.

The chief stood up and pulled out a baton, WHACK! WHACK! He slammed the hard black wood stick across her back and side. The pain was so overwhelming, Tasia instantly blacked out. The chief, not caring he was violating her civil rights, continued to pillage the poor girl with the nightstick, simultaneously kicking and stomping her body. Seconds later, reclaiming consciousness, all Tasia could see through her watery, reddened hazy eyes was the chief hovering over her, hands on his waist, smiling. She vomited up blood and wailed out in pain. “Are you ready to sign?”

“Please, pp-ppplease officer, no, pl—” BUZZ! BUZZZZZZZ! The oppressive cracka yanked out a taser and electrocuted the girl, her body shaking and trembling like she was having a seizure. Foaming at the mouth, her quivers eventually subsided. As she laid on the ground, a pool of blood forming near her mouth. She also lay in a pool of her own urine, and soiled her pants. “Think long and hard about your life, missy. Do you wanna make it out here alive? Yes – sign the paper. No. Keep acting like you’re some uppity nigger. Dr. King is dead. Welcome to the real world.”

Chapter Twenty-Five

Many days later… Darnisha, despite being initially hesitant on staying with Tre, found herself super-comfortable in his crib for nearly a week now. What was supposed to be only a day or two quickly turned into a staycation in the cop's posh loft in Downtown. It was a typical Saturday afternoon. Tre was off work for the weekend. Darnisha just stepped out of the shower after coming back from the gym inside his building. Tre was in the living room watching TV – CNN to be exact. He wasn't the type of dude who was really into sports; he was an avid news junkie.

After Darnisha dried her body off, she quickly slipped on some panties and then threw on a t-shirt, then made her way out to the kitchen to cook Tre some lunch. All day she had been planning to show off and cook him a hearty New Orleans-styled dish. Crawfish jambalaya and honey butter cornbread.

Once she made her way out to the kitchen, Tre caught a glimpse of her and her bottom half hanging out from under the shirt. His dick began to swell with blood and get super-hard, "Shit, you better go throw on some pants before I attack you," Tre said, staring at her rose-covered tatted up redbone ass.

"Nigga you funny as hell, but damn, I already gave you some pussy earlier. You want more?" she laughed as she rummaged through his cabinets, taking downthe pots and pans she needed to start cooking.

"I told you I'm a pussy fiend…," he laughed.

"I can tell. Shit, you ain't gotta tell me twice!" Darnisha chuckled as she turned on the water faucet and threw a box of rice into a large pot.

"So if you know that, why you gon bring yo ass out here lookin' like birthday cake," he licked his lips, stood up and then marched his way over to the kitchen, rubbing his thick hands. Once in Darnisha's presence, he grabbed her by the waist, his eyes suddenly filled with intense lust, more than ready to ravage the shit out of her pussy. Although she was a bit worn out from earlier, she was ready to go again. She realized perhaps she had to go through all this drama with Darnisha, Tahmir and ultimately with Ryann in order to meet Tre's

sexy thick ass. Bitch hit the lotto, and she wasn't gonna lose the winning ticket. Despite her getting approved for the apartment she always wanted, Tre offered more. He was single, no kids, was making good money down at the police department, on top of getting good money from the Cartel boss he was working for as hired help from time to time.

"Let's order a pizza or something later. You ain't gotta cook for me. I just wanna feel that pussy again, lil mama." Tre licked her right ear and marched his hands down to her wet middle. He lifted up the t-shirt, pulled her panties back and began to rub her bulging juicy clit. Chills ran down her spine.

Seconds later he pushed her to the kitchen counter, bent her down and pulled her panties down. He got on his knees and without giving a damn, he stuffed his face deep within her cheeks, eating her pussy from behind. Darnisha trembled at the feel of his tongue licking her soppy pussy lips. His titillating tongue danced all down her slit. As she came, he sucked her juices out of her cave like hot soup. As he continued to devour her pussy from the back, he stuck two fingers inside her wet middle, instantly finding her g-spot, massaging it up and down and in a circular motion, making her legs shake uncontrollably. "Ohmygod, I'm cumming!" She squirted her juices all over the place, down her legs and all over Tre's face. Then like the freak nigga he was he stuck his tongue deep down in her asshole, licking that shit while he still finger fucked her wet creamy pussy.

Once he got done, he stood up and slapped her ass. He pulled down his pants and slapped his rod against her ass and it jiggled. Although she was still a bit sore from earlier, she was ready to take the dick again.

"Mhmm," he moaned, inserting himself right into her pink center. As he plowed in and out of her from the back at Ferrari-like speed, bliss vibrated down her legs, numbing her thighs and calves. She almost wanted to faint. She just kept throwing that ass back on him as he dug deeper and deeper, stretching out her walls, knocking on the front door of her uterus. Next thing you know she was gushing all over his dick. He pulled out, turned her around and forced her down on her knees. "Suck all that shit off. You like how you taste, huh?" He plowed his dick down her throat, forcing her to suck up all her juices off his ten inch dick.

Once she mopped up the juices off his dick, he stood her back up, picked her up and inserted himself right back into her, and marched the both of them to the living room. He dropped her down to the floor and began to tear away at her pussy. Her legs spread wide open, she had each leg spread from the east coast to the west coast, allowing Tree to go deeper and deeper, damn near touching the seat of her

soul.

"Whose pussy is this bitch?!?!" he asked, continuing to go in and out of her.

"It's your's Zaddy! It's yours!" she replied in her dick drunken stupor. Nigga was all up in her core and stomach. Ladies, you ever had dick so good, that shit felt like it was touching the tip of your heart – well, that was exactly what Tre was doing – slamming dick so deep within her middle, she felt like she was about to go into cardiac arrhythmia. Her eyes rolling in the back of her head, her mouth flung wide open, tongue hanging out to the side, she released more squirt juices all over the place.

He spent the next ten minutes or so pumping in and out of her until he came all up in her.

Once he got done, he immediately slid out of her, stood up, and pointed down to his rod. That was his signal to tell her to clean that dick off with her tongue. She wrapped her lips around his shaft and head, sending him into frenzy, making sure she extracted any lingering nut out of his shaft.

"Damn girl, I fuckin' love you" he panted. The moment she heard those words emanate from his mouth, she smiled. Bingo. She won him over. That was the power of that p. It never failed. She got up off the floor, made her way to the bathroom and cleaned herself up. Seconds later, Tre popped up in the bathroom. "Round three?" He laughed.

Darnisha nervously smiled. She didn't know if she could go again. He licked his lips. "Don't be afraid of the dick," he then bent her over, ready to plow that pussy out again.

~

Buzz! Buzz! Tre's loft doorbell buzz. Ledo's Pizza was at the door. Tre pulled out his wallet and handed Darnisha two $20 bills. "Can you go get that?" Tre asked. Darnisha slavishly took the bills at Tre's command, got up from his lap she was napping on to go get the door.

"...This is CNN Breaking new. Zach Gadowsky, one of the founding members of the social network app, CubeTalk, was found murdered in his Albuquerque, New Mexico ranch today. Local police suspect he may have been robbed in a drug deal gone bad. Police say no suspects have been apprehended..."

The news bulletin flashed around Tre's TV screen, and while he was used to hearing similar murder stories being a Homicide detective, his mouth dropped in shock when his eyes attached themselves to the picture of the so-called murder victim. It was the white man he sold Tasia to. His heart rate picked up to a rapid pace, starting to pound harder than African war drums. His breathing

intensified, and all his mind could focus on was seeing a picture of the white guy burn into his eyes. No suspects were apprehended which meant the police probably thoroughly searched his home found no trace of Tasia. Maybe he killed her and buried her? Maybe he sold her off to someone else. Or maybe, just maybe, she escaped and was on her way back to Chicago. If the last scenario was the case, shit was about to hit the fan.

"Tre! Tre! Wassup witchu?!? Why you ignoring me?!?" Hearing Darnisha's nagging voice suddenly snapped Tre out of his anxiety-ridden trance. "Sorry...Just got distracted."

Darnisha looked at him confused, perplexed why he was acting all frozen and what not. "What's wrong? You act like you seen a muhfuckin' ghost or some shit."

"Just thinkin' about some work shit. Anyways, I'm hungry. Let's eat..." Tre stood up and marched over to the kitchen. "You want anything to drink, bae?" he asked Darnisha, going through his cabinet to pull out a bottle of Henny.

"Nah, I'm good..."

Good. Cuz he was gonna need this entire bottle after hearing that news.

Chapter Twenty-Six

"Ahummm, you ready to sign that confession, nigra?" Chief Cummings stood on the other side of Tasia's cell, looking her down as she lay on the ground, reeling in pain from days of being tortured by the burly, racist police officer. This cracka wasn't going to give up either. He was determined to get the young nigger bitch to confess to being a gang drug smuggler so he could go ahead and process her, send her off to go through a speedy trial in Tampico County, and move on with business as usual. He usually didn't have this much trouble when he rounded out "suspects" making their way through his town, but Tasia was on some "we shall overcome" shit and he wasn't having it.

Tasia though couldn't quite possibly understand what was going on. She assumed maybe there was some massive mix up, but little did she know she was just an unfortunate victim that was going to play right into a vast conspiracy on the part of some racist, corrupt police officers looking to cash in on her young black body. Shit was like slavery all over again. Charge innocent black people with crimes, convince an all-white jury of their guilt and then ship them off to a prison so they could get free labor out of them for the next twenty to thirty years.

Tasia thought the Chief's question, and truth be told, she'd rather be shipped off to prison, than to die at the hands of this tortuous white supremacist. But she couldn't give in. She knew had she agreed to finally put her signature on that forced fake confession, her life as she knew it would be over, and she'd spend the rest of her days locked behind bars in a prison somewhere off in the middle of the desert of New Mexico.

She didn't respond to the Chief's question, and he took that as a signal to ramp up his torture. "Fine, well. Let's see if Kenny can get you to talk." Who was Kenny? The Chief disappeared from Tasia's jail cell, and moments later she could hear the heavy panting of what sounded like a dog. The Chief came back to her cell, but this team, the biggest, most vicious looking german shepherd was leashed to his hand. Chief Cummings whipped out his keys, opened the jail cell and

walked in with Kenny. Tasia's eyes widened in fear because now she quickly understood the Chief was going to use the dog to scare the girl into signing the confession.

"Kenny! GET'EM BOY! EAT THIS NIGGER!" Suddenly the massive canine growled, exposing his foaming violent fangs, looking like he was ready to tear into Tasia's thick legs and arms. The dog, centimeters away, ready to bite into Tasia, was suddenly pulled back by the Chief. "You ready to talk, gal?!?" Chief Cummings asked once more.

"Please, please no!" Tasia cried, begging for the Chief to not sick the dog on her. Tears swelling in her eyes, she held her hands up fear, hoping to shroud her torso from being ripped apart by the dog.

Chief Cummings let out a huge chuckle. "I see you're afraid of dogs...We can end this all if you just sign the damn paper!"

"Fff-fine," Tasia stuttered and succumbed. She couldn't take the torture anymore. She just had to accept this as her fate. "Atta girl....I knew you'd come around. Be right back." Chief Cummings left with Kenny, and came back with the printed confession and a blue ink pen. He kneeled down and handed Tasia the piece of paper and pen. "Sign right there and date it..."

Tasia took the pen out of the man's hand, glanced over the confession one last time, and then without question signed her name on the dotted line...Chief Cummings stood up, smiled and folded up the paper and tucked it in his shirt pocket. He put the ink pen in another pocket. "You want somethin' to eat?"

Tasia, who hadn't eaten in days, and was only given from time to time, a cup of semi-brown faucet water, nodded her yes. Chief Cummings left the jail cell and moments later came back with a plate in his hand. He slid the plate down to Tasia, "Enjoy," he smiled and then left.

Tasia looked the plate and cried. It was Kenny's dog food. But her hunger pains were so intense, she just needed to put something edible in her mouth to quell her nausea and agony. She scooped the food up into her hand, and took a smell. She jerked back, repulsed at the harsh, raw smell of the gelatinous mush. She blocked everything out of her mind, closed her eyes, and stuffed her mouth with the food.

~

"Ahhh, fuck yeah, come on yeah, spread that pretty little pink pussy, yeah, show me what you're workin' with," Chief Cummings moaned as he sat in his office, pants down, jerking off to teeny bopper porn on his computer. Fapping his unimpressive old white and pink dick, his eyes had laser focus on the young girl on the computer screen who

was spreading her legs and letting some stud with a ten inch dick go inside her tight cave.

With his right hand lubricated with cocoa butter and his spit, he was almost on the edge of cumming all over his desk. Chief Cummings, although married to the same white wrinkled hag for the last forty years, was a porn addict and like so many of the men in town, would occasionally take trips down into Mexico and fuck underage prostitutes. But the Chief was on his shift tonight, so he opted to spend his long nine hour shift perusing pornhub, looking for a video he hadn't seen before.

Buzzz...Suddenly the jail's electricity powered down, and Chief Cumming found himself trapped in his pitch black office. "What the fuck?!?" The perplexed police chief was angered and yet scared. Angered because he was just about to bust his load. But scared because out of all of his years of working at the jail, this never happened. It didn't sound like it was lightning or thundering outside, so he knew this could've not been weather related. Since this was the only jail in the town, there were only two other part-time officers who worked there, and they were out on their beat, patrolling the few neighborhoods and distant trailer parks the most residents lived in. Trying his best to get his eyes to adjust to the dark, he rapidly tapped his desk, searching for his phone. He picked it up...No signal. "What the...?" He threw the phone down then fumbled his hand to his desk drawer, opened it up and searched frantically for a flash light. Once he got his hands on one, he turned on the light, and the room barely filled with illumination, only giving the Chief the ability to look down at the ground and chart his way out of the office.

Once he managed to make his way out his office, he slowly paced himself down to Tasia's jail cell to check up on her. He flashed the light into her cell and saw her huddled up in the corner, holding her knees, looking frightened as shit. "I'm gonna go to the back and turn on the power generator. I don't know what happened."

Tasia nodded her head ok. The Chief then sojourned through the pitch black hallway, taking careful strides not to bump into anything. A sudden whisp of air streamed pass him, and he flashed the light into its direction, looking to see what made that noise. He put his hand on his gun holster, unbuckled it, and pulled out his pistol and began walking again, paranoid. He heard the whisk again, and this time pointed the gun and flashlight in the direction in which he thought he heard the airy noise.

"Who's there? I will shoot. Do you understand me?" The Chief barked. Someone was inside the station and he was prepared to shoot whoever

was stalking him. Chief Cummings continued walking.

PLOW! He felt the back of a heavy object go across his head, immediately falling to the ground and blacking out.

The stalking ghost picked up the Chief's flashlight and gun. He then searched his belt buckle looking for a ring of keys. Then the phantom sprinted down the hall and towards the jail. Once the mysterious wraith made his way towards Tasia's cell, he waved the light into her cell.

"Tasia!"

The fearful girl widened her eyes in excitement. It was Gemini. He quickly unlocked the jail cell, and she got up and lunged towards him, giving him the biggest, tightest hug possible. "Come on, let's go. These crackas are crazy ass hell!"

"Ok!" She followed behind her savior as the two of them dashed down the hall, quickly approaching Chief Cummings still spread out on the floor. Gemini could see that the man was gaining consciousness. Tasia, who now was filled with venemous, vengeful rage, without hesitation lunged towards the old white man and punted his head, sending him back into unconsciousness.

Gemini chuckled, "Here, hold this," he then handed Tasia the flashlight and pistol. Gemini then leaned down, took the officer's cuffs and arrested him. "We gotta get him down to the basement where I got these other pigs at. We gotta kill them. No other choice."

"Ok..." Tasia mumbled. Once Gemini had the corrupt racist pig handcuffed, Gemini used all his might to drag the man back down the hallway, off to a side door that led to a basement. "Open the door," he instructed Tasia. Following his command, she opened the basement door, and she used a flashlight to illuminate the staircase leading down to the basement. Then Gemini ruthlessly kicked the Chief's body down the stairwell. The two then marched down the steps and went deep into the basement. A kerosene lamp was already lit in the basement, giving the room faint dim light. Gemini dragged Chief Cummings into the center of the floor, where two other officers lay on the floor, handcuffed, their legs tied up with rope, and their mouths muzzled with tape. Their eyes widened at the sight of Tasia and Gemini as they observed the pair push Chief Cummings close to them.

"Alright, Ms. Tasia. It's showtime. Remember what I told you the last time?"

Tasia remembered Gemini telling her that before she got ready to murder someone, she needed to not feel guilty. She quickly reminisced the last week she spent being tortured by the racist corrupt. Couple that with everything else she'd gone through, she was ready to blow this man's head off. Gemini handed her the same gun JoJo gave her days ago. Already accustomed to its feel, she confidently gripped the

gun and without saying anything, she lit all the officers up.

POW! POW! POW! POW! POW! POW! POW! POW! POW! POW! POW! Gemini jumped back, a bit surprised and taken aback that the girl didn't even wait for him to give her permission to execute the officers. She did it with such ease, no remorse in her soul. They deserved every ounce of their execution and hearing the sound of the bullets pop and explode was orgasmic to her young ears.

Gemini searched the room one last time, making sure he didn't leave behind any evidence the pair had even paid a visit to the jail, let alone the despicable, trailer trash town. He searched the pockets of the officers one last time just to make sure they didn't have any money on them. One of them had a $20 bill. "Broke muhfuckas," Gemini spat once he got done searching their pockets.

"Ok, let's bounce!" Gemini then led the two back upstairs, out the door of the police station, where his BMW was parked. She hopped in the passenger side, and Gemini to the driver's. They sped off into the night, this time Gemini cautious of his speed, because they couldn't risk getting pulled over again.

"Sorry for putting you through all this, lil mama. I promise it won't happen again," Gemini promised. She hoped so. She just wished now Gemini would stick to his original promise and get her safely back to Chicago.

Chapter Twenty-Seven

Darnisha sat in a police station not too far away from her old apartment, sniffling and crying her heart out to the old white female police officer who started back at her, somewhat empathizing with her situation… “So, when is the last time you saw Tasia…You said it was it over a week ago, correct?”

“Yess-yesss ma’am…We had got into an argument and she stormed out of the house. She told me she was gonna go stay with a friend, but I didn’t know who that friend was. We didn’t really get along like that, so I had no idea of trying to figure out who this friend was.” Darnisha lied.

Tasia had now been gone for over two weeks, and Darnisha, not wanting to get in trouble for child endangerment, did exactly what Tre told her do – go down to the station, file a missing persons police report and just let the investigation fall into the cracks of Chicago’s inept police bureaucracy. He told Darnisha young girls, especially young black girls in the hood, go missing all the time and there was little they could really do. He told Darnisha the FBI rarely got involved in missing persons cases. Following Tre’s script to the tee, she fake cried and wailed in front of the police officer, showing such zealous concern over Tasia’s disappearance.

As the police officer continued to fill out a bunch of paperwork and ask her preliminary questions, obvious standard protocol, Darnisha left the station a proud bitch that she followed her newfound bae’s instructions. It was an early Thursday morning, and after Darnisha took care of business down at the police station, her second stop was to go check up on Jashaun at the hospital. Tomorrow was going to be his last day at the hospital, and although they weren’t on the best of terms, she now more than ever wanted to make amends to fix the situation she put her son into.

An hour passed, and her Uber ride dropped her off at LaGrange Park Methodist Hospital. Darnisha made her way inside and to Jashaun’s ward. Before she got close to his room, a doctor who’d recognized Darnisha stopped her before she got too far. “Hey, Ms. Johnson! Can I speak to you for a second?” a short, black lady who

looked like she was in her mid-40s nervously smiled at Darnisha.

"Hey…Dr….? I forgot your name, I'm sorry…"

"Dr. Haughton…I'm the chief neurosurgeon. I'm one of the doctors that helped with his brain MRI. Let's talk in private in my office for a second, if you don't mind…"

"In regards to?"

Dr. Haughton took a deep breath, "I think we should talk about this in private…"

"Sure," Darnisha replied, somewhat perplexed as to why the doctor needed to urgently speak to her in private. Once the two made it into the small, sterile-smelling cold office, Dr. Haughton pulled out a seat in front of her desk for Darnisha to sit down in. The doctor made her way to her seat, sat down and fumbled through some paperwork. "Care for anything to drink?" Dr. Haughton asked politely, reaching down to a mini fridge next to her desk.

"I'm good. So umm, what's this about?" Darnisha asked with impatience laced in her tone.

The doctor looked at her suspiciously, and then took a swig from a chilled water bottle. "I wanted to have a talk, sister to sister, if you know what I mean…"

Darnisha scrunched her face up, and with a raised brow asked the doctor, "What do you mean? I am so confused right now."

"Well, one of my colleagues has been trying to contact you for days now, but you've been a bit MIA. Jashaun seems a bit despondent. What's really going on, sis?"

"Excuse me?" Darnisha was so fucking confused. Why was this doctor who she didn't know from Adam coming at her like this. From the tone in her voice, Darnisha knew she was questioning her parenting skills. Although she felt guilty for putting Jashaun in this situation in the first place, she didn't need another bitch reminding her of just how fucked up she was.

"I don't think this is appropriate, I need to speak to yo—"

Before Darnisha could even spit out her complaint, "I'm the manager…Actually the manager of managers. Other than the president of the hospital, I'm the one in charge…"

Darnisha sat silent, still perplexed but now viciously anger. She had it in her to go the fuck off on this hifalutin, bourgeois bitch who thought she was better than her because she was a doctor and shit. The doctor shook and lowered her head. "Look girl…I'm not tryin' bust your shit."

"WELL it sounds like you are! You don't know what I been through. You don't know me or my story. I just lost my partner last week! I've been through a lot and I don't need no one try to tell me how to ra—"

“Jashaun has HIV…” Dr. Haughton mumbled in a flat voice, her eyes unblinking as she stared down the angry so-called mother.

Darnisha’s mouth flung open and her mind went straight to blank. Her heart stopped for a second, beating again, but this time faster and harder, millions of butterflies forming in the deep trenches of stomach.

“Wh-whhat?!?” Tears began to form in her shady brown eyes, and her body trembled at the sound of the devastating health news.

“I’m so sorry, Darnisha. We’ve been trying to call you all week and tell you. We’ve known for some time now, but every time you came to the hospital, there were no doctors on staff to tell you. We obviously couldn’t tell Jashaun yet because he was in a coma up until recently and because he’s still a minor, we wanted to reach out to you first before we told him.”

“I j-just ca-can’t believe any of this.” But Darnisha could believe it. She afterall knew of Jashaun’s secretive homosexual lifestyle and she was one who used it to her advantage, pimping the boy just to make a few extra bucks a week.

You would’ve thought she would’ve been a bit more on top of shit like this given he was running around with so many niggas on the DL in the hood. She’d give him very basic advice, telling him just make sure he wore protection or what not, but he barely took heed to the advice because he didn’t think it was such a big deal. Also, because he was still so young and immature, he’d just assumed HIV/AIDS was something of the past – a relic disease of the 80s and 90s, and today, he thought people just customarily got vaccinated against the disease. He guessed wrong.

“How long has he had it?” Darnisha asked as her tears streamed down her cheeks. The doctor handed her a napkin so she could wipe her face. “Well, there’s an incubation period with HIV, and most tests won’t detect viral antibodies until four weeks. When he was first admitted, we do a standard test, but nothing picked up. But when we did a standard blood test on him last week, he came back positive. We ran another test just to be sure – it came back positive again. That means he was recently infected…”

“Ohmygod, ohmygod!” Darnisha continued to weep. She lowered her head into her palms and began to uncontrollably sob. Dr. Haughton got up from her seat and wrapped her arms around Darnisha, “It’s gonna be alright, Ms. Johnson. The medications today are so different. He can live a long life so long as he stays healthy, takes his medicine, and doesn’t stress himself out…What’s important right now though is we have to tell him. This is his life. His journey. Come on, let’s go tell him. The sooner, the better.”

“I can’t, I can’t…I did this to my son, I should’ve been more careful

with him," Darnisha protested Dr. Haughton's suggesting of going to immediately tell Jashaun his HIV diagnosis. This was just too much to bear. The boy already suffered serious brain damage, and now he was HIV positive?!? Darnisha had the impulse to just run out the hospital and never come back.

"Come on, let's go…" Dr. Haughton lifted a still weeping Darnisha out her seat, out the office, and down the hallway towards Jashaun's room. Darnisha quickly wiped her face clear of tears so Jashaun wouldn't sense something was wrong. Once Darnisha and Dr. Haughton approached his room door, Dr. Haughton looked at Darnisha, "Don't worry. Be strong. You gotta be for him, ok?"

"Ok…"

Knock! Knock! Dr. Haughton knocked on Jashaun's room door, and then proceeded to let herself in along with Darnisha. "Hey sugar, how ya feelin?" Dr. Haughton asked Jashaun. He was standing upright, for the first time, with the assistance of a physical therapist who was teaching him how to walk again. Jashaun and therapist looked over at the smiling Dr. Haughton yet nonchalant, flat-looking Darnisha. "Hey guys, we were just about to wrap up his session!" the white therapist stated.

"Cool…Well, actually could you give us a moment, Janice… Darnisha and I need to talk with Jashaun in private for a second," she smiled. The therapist hearing the sternness in Dr. Haughton's voice knew that was her cue to stop whatever she was doing and leave the room immediately. The therapist grabbed her belongs, passed Darnisha and Dr. Haughton, nervously smiled and exited the rom.

Now there was nothing but silence as Jashaun, draped in a white hospital gown, cautiously laid back down into the bed with the assistance of a cane. "What's going on?" Jashaun mumbled.

Dr. Haughton turned to Darnisha as the two of them approached Jashaun's bedside. The doctor turned her attention back to Jashaun, smiled and exhaled. "Jashaun, what's we're about to tell you is very important, mhmm-k?"

"Oo-kkk?" He looked at the doctor with slight apprehension, then his shady shitty bitch of a mother.

For the doctor, dishing out devastating diagnoses were routine, but in a situation like this, she understood HIV wasn't necessarily a death sentence – just a wake up call. Sensing the aura of tension growing between Jashaun and Darnisha, the doctor pretended for a second to be his mother. "Baby, you have HIV…" she said as she held his hand and rubbed it.

"Wh-whwhhat? I hh-hh-have HIV?" Tears swelled in his not exactly innocent doe eyes.

"Yes, but don't worry. We already got you on medicine already.

We caught it in time, so if you just stay strong, be healthy, take your medicine like you're supposed to, you can live a long time. Things are different now. Your generation is lucky, I remember back in the nineties wh—"

"I nnn-nneed tt-ttt-to talk to my mother in pppp-p-private," Jashaun stuttered as streams of tears fell down his face.

The doctor exhaled, "Ok, just let me know if you need anything, I'll be waiting outside," Dr. Haughton then turned to Darnisha, rubbed her back and walked out the room.

Once the door was closed, Darnisha just stood there, crying, holding her mouth. Jashaun turned his face away from his mother, not wanting to look at that evil bitch.

"You…Yyy-yyou dd-d-dd-did this t-t-ttto me…" he cried.

"Baby, please, I'm so sorry, I di-didn't think this would happen. Please, ohmygod, I am so sorry!"

"J-jjust leave," he stuttered. "I never want to see you again. You owe me. You owe Jasmine. You ruined us. Look at me. I can't even talk right no mo. I can barely walk. I hh-hh-hate your fuckin' guts. All I ww-want from you is for you to just make sure I got what I need to survive. Just send me my money. That's the least thing you can do. If not, I'm gonna call the police and tell them everything. EVERYTHING! I don't know what happened to Khai. I don't know what you did to Tahmir. But I'll tell them everything else. I'll even tell them about what you did to Tasia's mom."

Hearing those words pour out of Jashaun's mouth were fumes on her inner fire. Under any other circumstances she would've already had her hands around his neck, but she knew she was strong. Abusing Tasia was one thing – that girl never came out of her womb and she really didn't know her up until a few years ago. But Jashaun, her only son, the boy she used to call her prince, was now lying in a hospital bed, half-paralyzed with brain damage and now HIV all because of her greed and lack of morals.

She clenched her fists, resisting the urge to suddenly harm him. But the little soul she had left told her she already harmed him enough. Just do as he said. Take care of him – from a distance, but don't attempt any form of communication with him or he was going to spill some information. Information that could land her in jail – and not just for what she did to her baby son, Tahmir and Tasia – but to her own sister. What did Darnisha do to Latasha, Tasia's mom? She pouted up her face and wept.

"Jjust leave now…" Jashaun didn't care for her crocodile tears. She pulled out the napkin from her pocket Dr. Haughton gave her earlier, wiped her face and then stormed out of the hospital room.

"Darnisha, where you goin'?!?" Dr. Haughton tried to get

Darnisha's attention seeing her bust out and take off, but Darnisha through her hand up, giving her a signal she was done talking to her. Dr. Haughton looked around, perplexed and then went back inside Jashaun's room to go tend to her hospital "son".

Chapter Twenty-Eight

"Hey Ma, I can't talk now. I'm studying for this test. Let me hit you back later, ok?" Jasmine barked through the phone. "Ok, baby gi__"

Before Darnisha could even finish her sentence, Jasmine hung up the phone. It was crazy because Jasmine was the last person she'd expect to switch up on her, but it seemed like boot camp was working – changing her daughter for the better, although in her eyes for the worse. Jasmine had been in boot camp now for months and slowly over time her daughter was acting more and more like that god damn Tasia. She was getting better grades in school, she stopped smoking weed, was going to church, and now wanted to go to college to become a nurse.

Now that Jashaun made it known he didn't want to have anything to do with her trifling ass, and Jasmine was becoming the antithesis of her, she felt like she had to put all of her energy into making this new relationship with Tre work. She had to. She had no one else in the world to rely on. She spent most of her life relying on and using litters of men, and worse of all, her own children, for her own gain. But now that her children were "maturing" away from her, she had to make this new relationship with Tre work...well, that's if he wanted to. For the short time these two had been together, other than busting down her guts on a daily basis, Tre hadn't uttered any word he wanted to be in a committed relationship with her. It's funny too because usually Darnisha wasn't the type of bitch to get all gung ho and lovey dovey with a nigga, but with the way Tre was piping her down, plus the money, clout and power he had, this nigga had a leash over her neck.

After Jasmine hung up the phone, Darnisha threw her phone off to the side of her as she sat on Tre's living room couch, a rerun of Family Matters blaring in the background. Seconds later, tears formed in her eyes, and she began to cry. Darnisha, despite being an evil ass bitch, still had an inkling of that womanly feeling of wanting a family. Although she had a very crass, ghetto and simplistic outlook on life, she'd always imagined that once she found a real boss kingpin nigga, she could be on some housewife shit and settle down in some palace

far out in the 'burbs or in Miami or some shit.

Next thing you know Darnisha heard keys jangling at loft's front door. It was nearly 9 PM, right around the time she was expecting Tre. She quickly wiped her face free of her salty tears. Tre opened the door, and suddenly Darnisha jumped from the couch and dashed towards him. "Hey booski, I've been waiting for you all day! You hungry? I made you some chicken and waffles," Darnisha fixed a huge smile.

Looking back at her nonchalantly, Tre lightly smiled and then went in to hug her, although not with sexy passion Darnisha had gotten accustomed since they'd been fucking. Darnisha sensed something was wrong. "What's goin on? You tired or something?"

He huffed, "Nah, just a long ass day at work. That's all..."

He just stared at her, and the smile he had seconds ago went flat. "Anyways, yeah, I'm hungry. Where the food at?" he then made his way into the kitchen. "It's in the microwave..." Darnisha answered. He took his plate out, sat down at a dining room table, and slowly ate away. Just thinking about Tasia was stressing him out.

~

"Ahh! Ahhhh! I'm cumming!" Darnisha was riding Tre's dick, although zaddy's dick tonight wasn't as good. After he let off in her, she slid off him, and fell to her side of the bed. Tre just laid there, motionless, his eyes fixed on the slowly moving ceiling fan. Darnisha went in to cuddle him, and began rubbing his glistening dark brown chiseled chest.

He was super-quiet. She sensed something was going on. She just knew it. Seconds turned into minutes, Darnisha and Tre fell asleep.

3:25 AM....Tre woke up, eyes widened, his dark brown pupils dilated and still fixed on the white ceiling fan's blades making their circular motion. He quickly pulled the covers off him and Darnisha, moved Darnisha's arm resting on his chest, and then pulled the covers back on the hoe who was in a deep sleep.

Within nothing on but a pair of briefs, he made his way back out to his living room, and towards his computer desk. He opened up his laptop, went to hotwire.com and ordered a plane ticket to Albuquerque. He dashed back into the room, grabbed his cell phone of his nightstand, and dashed back to the living room. He dialed police headquarters and decided to call in sick. Although he wasn't sick – he needed to put in overtime on his second job and find out what happened to Tasia. Since finding out that the man who he sold Tasia too was a prominent, well-known entrepreneur who somehow had connections to some drug bosses, Tre needed to find Tasia and kill

her, that's if she was still alive.

~

9:59 AM...Darnisha's eyes opened. Her vision hazy, she turned her head to the left, and then to the right. Tre was gone. She figured he went to work. She got out the plush bed, made her way to the shower and took a quick bath. She had shit to do today. She needed to head back to her apartment, and get the rest of her shit out. Now that she had her voucher, she was planning on giving her keys to the leasing office and finally putting a long end to her tumultuous stay in the infamous Altgeld Gardens housing project.

Once she got out the shower, dried herself off, did her hair and make up and put on an outfit, she made her way to the kitchen to grab a small bite to eat before heading out. Although Tre and Darnisha had only been fucking around with each other now for some weeks, he'd already given her a spare key so she could come and go as she pleased. Once she got into the kitchen, she saw a note and a white envelope resting on one of the countertops. She glanced over the note – "Hey, I would've woke you up last night, but I got called in to work on a special assignment for an murder investigation. I had to fly out of town. I left some cash in an envelope in case you need to get anything for your new apartment. I'll hit you up later on tonight. Miss you. Tre."

Darnisha then opened the envelope. Quickly fumbling through the cash, he left her a good $1000. She didn't really need the money though given that she already was sitting on the cash she got from selling off Tasia. She just took him giving her money as a kind gesture to allay any concerns she had about his whereabouts.

Something was off about Tre, she sensed. She knew it. Her ghetto ratchet spidey senses was telling her that Tre wasn't being forthcoming about something. Did this nigga have a wife? Kids? Maybe another side bitch he was fucking? Then again, she knew he worked on retainer for a cartel boss, so maybe he was just giving her a bullshit story to cover his tracks and he probably went out of town to go put in some work. She quickly shook off her looming unease, threw the money in her purse and headed out. Her uber was already downstairs waiting for her. She hopped in, and sped off to the far south side, ready to close one chapter of her life and begin the next – the boss bitch come up dream was becoming a reality.

~

"Ladies and gentlemen, welcome to Albuquerue International Sunport.

Local time is 1:45 PM and the temperature is 78 degrees farenheit.. For your safety and comfort, please remain seated with your seat belt fastened until the Captain turns off the Fasten Seat Belt sign. Please check around your seat for any personal belongings you may have brought on board with you and please use caution when opening the overhead bins, as heavy articles may have shifted around during the flight. On behalf of Delta Airlines and the entire crew, we'd like to thank you for joining us on this trip and we are looking forward to seeing you on board again in the near future. Have a nice day." Once the flight attendant finished her announcements, minutes later Tre's plane docked with the gate. Once the captain gave clearance for passengers to get up and begin deboarding, Tre popped up out of his seat, grabbed his shit and with nothing but Tasia on his mind, he zoomed right to the Enterprise car rental agency. Once he got his car, his first order of business was to head down to the local police station and try to get as much information as possible about the murder of Zach Gadowsky, his first and last sex trafficking client.

"Good afternoon ma'am, I'm here to meet with Lieutenant Dan Keller. We have a 2:30 meeting." Tre nervously smiled at the old white lady sitting at the reception desk inside the homicide division's office. Despite looking almost 80 years old, this old white bitch had the reddest hair that didn't pair well with her caked up, layers of make up she had all over her face. Did this bitch let a circus do her make up? Shit a funeral home? Tre was put off by the strange woman's appearance, and once she opened her mouth, exposing her rotten green teeth, his stomach churned.

"I'll call him right now to let him know you're here, you can have a seat over there," she said in a raspy voice, her hot coffee and cigarette dragon breath reaching Tre's nostrils, making him wanting to throw up all over the decrepit cracka bitch. From the sound of her voice matched by her dark green canines, Tre knew this old hoe smoked at least a thousand packs of cigarettes a day.

He just smiled, "Thank you..."

"There's some coffee and donuts over in the break room if your hungry, babe.." she muttered, giving him her attempt at a seductive look. Did this old white bitch call him babe? The hair on the back Tre's neck rose and his eyes widened hearing her call him that. His flaccid dick went even more limp – limp he was an 101-year old survivor of prostate cancer and would need an act of God to get his wrinkled dick hard every again in his existence.

Tre waited impatiently for about a good fifteen minutes, and finally Lieutenant Keller made his way out into the waiting area. "Detective Speights..." he said, instantly grabbing Tre's attention, his eyes fastened to his phone reading the news on CNN's mobile website.

Tre looked up and saw an older white man who looked like Tom Selleck's long lost twin. Muhfucka had the same jet black hair, wide face and thick Saddam Hussein mustache. Tre stood up and sauntered over to the lieutenant, also a homicide detective – assigned to the still active murder investigation of Zach Gadowsky. The two gentlemen shook hands. "Norma Jean, I'll be back later on," Lieutenant Keller waved goodbye to the old trailer trash clown ass-looking office secretary and receptionist. "Ok Lieutenant. Nice to meet you Detective Speights," she said in response and seductively smiled. Tre smiled back, "Same here..." The two detectives made their way out the door of the homicide division's office and to the lieutenant's squad car. The two hopped in and made their way to Zach Gadowsky's ranch, which was about a good 25 miles south of Albuquerque in Los Lunas, an upscale mountain suburb.

On their way to the ranch, Lieutenant Keller was throwing Tre questions left and right, inquiring why a Chicago police detective was involving himself in a murder investigation all the way out in New Mexico. Tre, the criminal mastermind he was, came up with the perfect story – he'd explain to the unassuming older white police detective that Zach was had affiliations with a local Chicago mob boss, and after a major sting a few weeks back, narcotics detectives discovered a treasure trove of printed financial records of the mob boss's underground sports gambling network. Zach, as he explained, was a major gambler and had gambled hundreds of thousands of dollars with the Mob boss. It was the perfect lie too because the story was partly true – that was Sammy "Lucky Red" Lucchiano, a reputed head mafioso in Chicago had been arrested some weeks back.

Tre could tell based off Lieutenant Keller's reaction to the fictitious story that not much action went down in Albuquerque. To Tre, stories like the Lucchiano raid were the norm in wicked Chi-town , and if he had it his way, he'd trade places with Keller in a heartbeat. The only reason why Tre was a cop in the first place was that it gave him access to resources so he could carry out perfect, well-executed, well-planned hits for his boss under the radar. Being a police officer gave him the ability to use police information to find targets, plant dope on rivals, rob corner boys and do other typical dirty copy shenanigans. And although being a homicide detective in the Chi came with a lot of reward and the ability to be on the frontline to see action, it also came with a lot of danger that Tre was getting tired of.

Finally arriving in the driveway of Zach's ranch, red police tape still wrapped around the vast premises, Lieutenant parked the police sedan and turned the car off. The two detectives got out and made their way inside the house. According to Lieutenant Keller, Zach wasn't married. He was a 40-year old bachelor who owned multiple

properties in New Mexico, Arizona and California. This ranch in particular, although massive, was like a fourth home for the mysterious entrepreneur . Once inside, Tre went through each room of the house, combing for any "evidence" – which was anything indicating what possibly happened to Tasia. Zach obviously was a minimalist, well at least with this house, because as Tre went through each of the seven bedrooms in the house, he couldn't find shit. Tre's first suspicion was maybe perhaps this wasn't the house where Tasia was being held at.

"How'd you all find him? What was he wearing?"

"Ehh, oddly enough he was in medical scrubs, but also topless."

"What did neighbors think about him? Did they think he was strange? Did they notice anything odd about his habits around here?"

"Ehh, not really...People knew him, but didn't know him...If you know what I mean..."

"Hrrrm," Tre continued combing through the house with the Lieutenant by his side. "Where's the basement? That's where his body was found, right?"

"Yup, right this way...It's a pretty huge fuckin' basement too." Lieutenant Keller led Tre out of one of the rooms and to the basement. Once he opened the door, the two marched down the vast staircase and entered the room. The overpowering smell that Tasia herself smelled while being held captive here hit Tre's nostrils as well. "Man, what in the fuck is that smell. It smells like formaldehyde or some shit," Tre instantly covered his mouth trying his best not to breathe in the horrid, weirdy spicy-sweet smell.

"No clue what the smell is coming from...."

Tre's police training and intuition went into high gear. Scanning the room left and right, up and down, Tre knew for sure this is exactly where Tasia was at. The basement was too oddly put together. What person put a bed in a basement that looked more like a vast storage room or wine cellar. "Do you all suspect he may have been involved in human or sex trafficking?" Tre questioned, still searching the room. He saw the bed. The mannequins. Then his eyes fixed on the massive freezer door.

"No, not really..."

"Hrrrm," Tre grumbled and walked over to the freezer. He opened it up, and saw nothing. It was completely cleared out with no evidence that anything had been stored in there. Despite it being super-cold, Tre kneeled down and ran his fingers down to the cracks and crevices of the floor of the freezer.

"Look at this," Tre mumbled, pinching a few strands of long hair from one of the corners in the freezer.

"What?" Keller bent down, squinted his eyes and saw it was hair –

long enough to belong to a woman. Possibly young since the strands were visibly dark brown.

"Whoa..."

"Yeah...exactly..." Tre stood up, wiped his hands and left the room. "I'd bag that shit up and run that down to forensics. Better yet – send that off immediately to the Feds and see what comes back. Might match some bodies."

Tre looked around the room, again using his Chicago police detective training, obviously superior to Albuquerque's, to see if he could find any more clues. Starting from one corner, he ran his fingers across the walls until finally he came across a weird black circular bump that protruded from the wall. He rubbed the oddly placed black mound. "This is a camera..."

"How do you know?" Keller asked.

"Trust me, I know..." Tre assured.

Chapter Twenty-Nine

"Fucking unbelievable..." Lieutenant Keller was shocked that within less than two hours of police work, Detective Speights was able to find more clues than the entire homicide division of the Albuquerque police department.

Tre then scanned the dungeon once more – looking around, his eyes then fixed on the vast furnace in the room. He strolled over to it, popped the heavy door open and searched to see if he could find anymore clues. "You got a flashlight?" Tre asked. Lieutenant Keller walked over, pulled out a flashlight from his side and handed it to Tre. "Thanks..."

Tre then illuminated the interior of the furnace with the light and saw nothing but a tiny mound of ash situated in one of the corners. His eyes intensely scanned the furnace, trying his best to see if he could find anything odd. Boom! And there it was...he saw a tiny fragment – he suspected it could've been human bone. He reached in, pulled it out and closely examined the fragment. With butterflies invading the depths of his stomach, and already knowing the type of motherfucker he was dealing with, Tre figured it all out. Zach was a fucking deranged rapist and serial killer, and he'd been trafficking women, freezing their bodies and then burning them in the furnace.

"Our guy, Mr. Gadowsky, is a serial killer," Tre confirmed his suspicions once he whipped out his phone and compared the bone fragment with the picture of the tip of a finger. Tre then showed Lieutenant Keller the comparison. Again shocked, yet impressed with Tre's detective work, the unassuming small town police detective pulled out his phone and fumbled through his list of contacts.

"What are you doing?" Tre asked, his eyes turning to curious, stern slits.

"Calling up my buddy at the FBI! We need them down here ASAP!"

Tre suddenly put his hand on the lieutenant's hand, stopping him from making the phone call, "Don't do that. Not yet."

"Why not?" Lieutenant Keller looked perplexed yet open to Tre's suggestions. He had to be because if it wasn't for him, the Lieutenant was days away from considering the case cold and closed, and he was

going to have to move on to the next homicide investigation.

"Because do you want the Feds to come in, push you back and then take credit? Think about all the women this sick motherfucker probably killed? Let me ask you a question, Lieutenant. How much are you making? You've been on the force for what now??? Like almost 30 years? I'm thinking a good $65,000?"

The humbled detective, surprised by Tre's audacity, shook his head no, "Actually more like $55,000..."

"Right, exactly. Look. I'm gonna set you up to make it seem like you're the one who cracked the entire case. You get all the credit. Camera crews will swarm down here from New York, LA, Chicago and DC. You'll be interviewed left and right. No telling if this motherfucker got other women hidden elsewhere and we just haven't found them yet. That is found them alive. You'll be seen as a hero, and then even better, you'll be offered a book deal. We ain't talkin' a couple of thousand. We're talkin' a couple million. You'll be set for life."

"Shit..." The detective hearing Tre's sales pitch, put his phone back into his pocket and just stood there, quiet, letting Tre take the lead.

"We need to find that video footage though. My inclination is that this dude wouldn't just have his shit out in the open for anyone to get access to."

Tre, with his hands on his hips, spun on his shoes, scanning the room again...Then it hit him. If Zach was recording and monitoring his captives, he was doing this from either a cell phone or laptop and that laptop was somewhere in the house. "Let's go," Tre said as he lead the way upstairs and to what he presumed was the master bedroom.

Once inside, Tre flipped the king-sized mattress. Nothing. He dashed into the vast walk-in closet, rummaged through shoe boxes, suits, and other random boxes. Nothing. Without hesitation he ripped the clothing racks out of their wall sockets, and then ran his hands across the wall. Then he arrived at a section of the wall that looked like it had been recently painted over.

"Can I see your gun?" Tre asked. Keller then handed Tre his pistol.

Turning the service weapon into a makeshift hammer, Tre pounded away at the blue-painted closet wall patch, creating a gaping hole. He looked inside the dark hole and saw a bunch of red and blue lights flashing rapidly. It was a miniature computer server that had several wires and cables attached to the back of it, running down deep into the wall.

Tre gripped the exposed dry wall panel and tore it away, creating a larger hole. Once he had enough space to put both of his hands into the wall, he meticulously detached the server from its base. Then he

and Keller walked out the closet and back to the squad car outside. Tre had his laptop bag in the backseat of Keller's squad car.

Once the two gentlemen got inside, Tre hooked the small server to his laptop using an extra USB cable. Tre knew exactly how these types of servers worked. The camera installed in the basement was a basic home security system, and the more advanced models usually came with a server that would archive video footage. This was standard for these types of cameras. This allowed homeowners to have access to footage in the event their house got broken into. For Zach to have been a tech guy, Tre thought the serial killer was a complete dumbass for not hacking the server's settings to stop it from saving and protecting video files from deletion. Although these cameras and their servers were built purposely that way to avoid people hacking them, Tre knew that it could be done, as he'd done it before anytime he needed to eliminate any evidence of his presence when he'd do hits.

As Tre fumbled through the video server's archives, based on the date that it was believed Zach was murdered, he located a number of videos from that date. He opened them up and voila..His heart pumped hard – racing a million beats per second as his eyes attached to a bound up, naked Tasia, crying and looking anxious.

Keller, watching as well, almost needed to throw up when the footage would show Zach dragging lifeless, naked female bodies out of the freezer, oil them up and massage them, and then do the unthinkable – fuck them like it was the end of the world. "This sick motherfucker!" Keller spat as he kept watching the horrid, sadistic video footage.

Finally Tre arrived at the last and final video. Zach, topless, but wearing green medical scrub pants, was taunting Tasia. There was no volume that could be heard from the video, so Tre had no idea what Zach was saying. Suddenly something grabbed Zach's attention away from Tasia. Maybe a doorbell? He stormed up stairs, only to come back down moments later with an armed pair of young black kids – two males to be exact. One of them was bald with a beard. The other, taller, had long dreads. The two guys had to either have been robbers or worse, possibly drug enforcers. As Tre observed the pair holding Zach hostage, the tall guy with dreads went to go free Tasia. She quickly put her clothes on and stood off to the side, looking scared as shit. Then Tre observed the unimaginable – the bald headed guy instructed Zach to get down on his knees. He could be seen talking to Tasia, teaching her how to use the gun in his hand. Then moments later, Tasia, looking fearful yet determined, blew Zach's head off his shoulders, and his lifeless body slumped to the ground immediately forming an oozing pool of blood around his head.

"Bingo!" Keller shouted. In his mind, this was going to be the

ultimate payday Tre spoke of, rather lied about earlier. “I told you, partner... I told you,” Tre smiled and then opened up the car door. “Alright, let’s go back inside and finish up,” Tre muttered.

Back in the basement, the two worked quickly to finish up processing the scene according to Tre’s standards. It’s crazy because despite Keller have decades more experience, he was learning so much from Tre.

“Hey, Keller...Look down at that baseboard for a sec and see if you notice any loose baseboards. I remember one time this one drug smuggler I busted lined dope and cash in baseboards” Tre instructed.

“Wow, for real?” Keller said, immediately following suit. The veteran detective bumbled over to the baseboard Tre pointed, kneeled down and pulled at the baseboard, seeing if it was loose. “Nah, it’s not loose...”

“Pull at it just a tad harder,” Tre mumbled. Getting the man’s attention away from him, Tre carefully sauntered over to where he’d placed his computer bag. Eyes glued to Keller, watching his movement, doing his best to keep him distracted, he quietly slid his hand into the bag and pulled out an extra black heavy duty extension chord.

Then, in the most stealth manner, he wrapped both ends of the long eight foot chord around his thick palms three times over, ensuring he had a tight grip over the ends. Keller didn’t realize it but Tre by now behind him, hovering over him. Keller, ignorant to what was about to happen, was still pulling at the edge of the baseboard, convinced perhaps there was something behind it. Suddenly without hesitation Tre swooped down and yanked the chord around Keller’s pale wrinkled neck.

“Ah! Ugh! Ah! Ah!” Keller fought and choke, trying his best to muster all his strength and might to overpower Tre’s attempt at choking him to death. He tried to kick himself out of Tre’s grip, but at each move of resistance and struggle, Tre pulled the chord tighter and tighter. The tightening around the older white man’s neck was so severe, the chord cut into his now reddened neck flesh, blood seeping through the tear and running down to his shirt. His eyes were rolling in the back of his head and as he tried making last, futile attempts at saving his life, he could almost feel his trachea crack under the pressure of Tre’s noose.

The man had no chance at survival – Tre was bigger, stronger, faster and more explosive in his will to kill. Choking the man came with ease to Tre, and once the man’s body went limp and collapsed to the ground, Tre without even thinking picked the now dead detective’s body up, threw it over his shoulders and walked over to the furnace. He slid the man’s body inside, closed the lid and powered

the furnace on to its highest temperature.

Mission fucking accomplished. Tre got exactly what he needed out of the detective.

Chapter Thirty

After getting the video footage showing Tasia escaping from Zach Gadowsky's house with those two young niggas and then killing Lieutenant Keller, Tre needed to get a good night's sleep in order to hit the road and begin the next phase of his "investigation." After coming back to his room and spending hours closely examining the video footage, Tre discovered that there were more cameras around the house, and those cameras too stored all types of video footage.

Zeroing in on outside footage minutes after Tasia and the two guys stormed out the basement of the ranch, Tre saw the young girl and the two presumed hittas hopping into a champagne BMW 740 iL, a female at the wheel, and then speeding off. Examining each frame of the grainy video footage, Tre was able to zoom in on the front State of Texas license plate of the beemer. He jotted down the tag number, called up one of his partners back at Chicago Police Department's headquarters and ran the tag.

Christopher McCray. That was who the car was registered to – in Houston, Texas. Tre phoned a few of his buddies down at Houston PD to see if he could get any info on this McCray. He got back a copy of McCray's driver's license and closely compared the smiling guy's picture on the license to the bald head nigga with the beard on the video footage. Match. But bad news – Tre discovered McCray had no prior criminal history...and was actually ex-military. In the fucking Marines to be exact!

Tre knew that if this guy was a hitta, enforcer, or contract killer, him having a military background made him all the more of a looming, very fucking dangerous threat. A threat that had to be squashed like motherfuckin' ASAP.

Strategizing, plotting and planning his next moves, Tre wondered if buddy was truly taking Tasia back to Chicago. What if he was going to sex traffic her as well? Or just outright kill her? He ran through so many what if's in his head, but there was one thing he knew for sure – he had no idea what exactly was going to happen next. And not knowing brewed anxiety deep within his dark and murderous core. He spent the rest of the night not trying to overthink the possibilities of

her whereabouts. He needed good rest and recovery to get this shit crackin'. Time was not on his side. It was working against him. After wrapping up his work for the night, he downed a bottle of Henny, watched some TV, jerked off, and closed his eyes, slipping straight to deep sleep.

Buzz. Buzz. Buzz. It was almost 2 AM, and Tre suddenly woke out of his slumber once his hyper-aware ears tuned into his cell phone's incessant buzzing. The corrupt cop and hitta rolled over to the nightstand where his hazy eyes searched for his phone hooked to its charger. He rubbed his eyes to gain good clarity to see who in the fuck was calling him this time of the night, err, this morning. It was his nigga Poot. Tre rolled his eyes and huffed, "Man, what in the fuck does this big nigga want?"

But given how late it was, Tre knew something had to have happened – Poot wasn't the type of nigga that would just call up someone in the wee hours of the morning. Immediately answering the phone he grumbled, "Wassup, nigga. Some shit must've happened for you to be callin' me this time of the morning..."

"Niggggggaaaaaa...Turn on the fuckin' news right now!" Poot exclaimed.

"Why? Fuck for what? I ain't in Chicago," Tre responded

"Where you at?!?"

"New Mexico...Out here tryin' track down that white muhfucka we sold that young bitch to. Turns out that muhfucka was a serial killer. And I can't find her ass."

"The fuck?!? – Anyways, we'll get back to that in a minute. But nigga, Cook County Jail is on fire! That shit is up in a fuckin' blaze. It looks like hell on California Avenue!"

"Whaat?!?" Tre immediately sat up in the bed. With one hand he held the phone up to his ear while he frantically searched for the remote control to the hotel room's TV. It was off to his left, under the comforter. He turned the TV on, quickly flicking through the channels to see if any local or national news outlets like CNN or MSNBC were reporting on the fire. Nothing. "Yo, you've got to be fuckin' kidding me right now?!? How in the fuck did that even happen? Was it lightning or something?!?"

"Shit, you asking the wrong one, partner..."

Tre then heard what sounded like some thot bitch in the background giggling, "Come on bae, my pussy is callin..."

"Ay man, lemme hit you back later...I got company," Poot chuckled.

"Aiight bro," Tre replied back, hung up his phone and went immediately to his phone's browser and looked up local Chicago news on Google. The first headline story that popped up was about the fire

at Cook County Jail, and that firefighters were presently working around the clock to put the massive fire out. “Tha fuck....” Tre shaking his head in disbelief, turned his phone off, plugged it back into the charger, and then went back to sleep. He needed another good three hours of sleep before waking up so he could jumpstart the day before sunrise, and hopefully find that potentially dangerous young bitch. If Tasia was with these mysterious niggas, on her way back to Chicago, it was just a matter of time before she’d head straight to the police and spills the beans on everything.

5:45 AM. Tre’s alarm clock sounded. He took a quick shower, gathered up all his belongings and quickly checked out the hotel and jumped on the e-way.

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Buzz. Buzz. Buzz. Darnisha’s phone was vibrating left and right on the nightstand next to her bed. Well, not her bed – actually Tre’s. She was still crashing at his place until she got all her new furniture and shit in her new place. Although now this manipulative, frivolous bitch had a new apartment, she wasn’t too passionate about it anymore. Crazy, right? She went through all of this insane drama for her to ultimately not wanna stay there no more. Her ratchet ass was ret (ignorant bitch’s way of saying ready) to lock that nigga down and secure her future. Still locked into a deep slumber, she slowly opened her eyes and lazily rolled over to the nightstand. She reached out, grabbed the phone and yawned. Someone from an unknown number was calling her. Usually she wouldn’t answer unknown numbers, but because she was still in and out of sleep, she didn’t give a fuck. It was damn near close to noon. Yup, motherfuckin’ noon and this non-working welfare fraud queen bitch was still in the bed. She had went out last night with a few of her girls from the hood, had a bunch of drinks and didn’t get back to the crib until damn near six in the morning.

“Hghh, hello?” she slowly grimaced in her raspy ratchet voice, her morning breath wreaking of vodka, cigarettes and dro.

“Ms. Johnson – This is Charles Baines, the assistant district attorney assigned to working on your son’s murder case. How are you this morning?”

“Ughhh, I’m fine... Just a lil tired. Feeling kind of under the weather...Wassup?” With her eyes still closed, Darnisha rubbed the side of her temple, trying her bust to rub away a growing migraine spreading into her eyes.

“Oh ok, well, I don’t know if you’ve seen the news, but last night there was a massive fire at the Cook County Jail. A number of prisoners were killed...including Mr. Thompkins.”

At first it took Darnisha's hung over ass a few seconds to realize what the prosecutor was talking about, but then it hit her. "What? Say that again?"

"Yes...Tahmir Thompkins was killed last night. We found the remains of his body inside his prison cell. He was being confined to a maximum security cell when a massive fire broke out."

"WHAAAAT?!?" Darnisha immediately sat up in the bed, eyes widened, in shock and disbelief. This was the last thing she expected. Under any other circumstance, hearing this type of news would've been absolutely devastating and fucking heartbreaking. But Darnisha all of a sudden produced the biggest, slimiest grin on her face, envisioning Tahmir burning up in a blaze, thousands of degrees of heat incinerating his skin like he was being tormented in the deepest levels of hell by Satan himself.

Then she jumped into an act – sobbing and wailing as if she was disheartened yet relieved to know the man who allegedly raped her oldest son and smothered her baby was dead. There was no need for a trial. "I know this is a lot to process, and we couldn't bring him to trial, but just see this as an act of God. What he did was horrible. Absolutely horrible, Ms. Johnson. In a case like this, if it was still legal, I would've recommended to the judge the death penalty. It looks like my prayers were answered. If you need any additional help or closure, just give me call, ok?"

"Okkk-kk" Darnisha fake wailed.

"By the way, I had been meaning to tell you this, but I'd like to help you set up a gofundme account to help raise money for Jashaun's recovery, and to also help you with any moving expenses. I know you're also dealing with that situation that happened a few weeks back at your apartment. How are you dealing with that?"

The moment Darnisha heard "gofundme", her ass immediately switched gears, and all her mind stayed on were the dollar signs the generous, empathetic assistant district attorney was going to help her get. "How much do you think we can raise from doing that?" She asked, still pretending like she was crying, but now she was already mapping out what she was going to do with those charitable donations – if she was going to get any at all. Shit, her girls last night were just talking about going to Cancun or the Dominican Republic. You'd think this dumb bitch would see this as an opportunity to use the funds to help out Jashaun, as she promised, but that was the least of her concerns. In her small, feeble mind, she'd already convinced herself the Universe was speaking favor into her simple hoe life. Gutter hoe dreams do come true.

"Well, I got a lot of friends on Facebook , and I am gonna get everyone in the office to share the gofundme page with their network.

I mean, who knows...I can't make any promises, but I think it'll be the right thing to do, you know? How's Jashaun holding up?" The ADA asked, showing more care and concern for her son than her ass was.

She rolled her eyes, "He's fine..Taking it one day at a time I guess."

"Good, good, good. That's so good to hear. And your other daughter – Jasmine. How's she holding up?"

"I'm sorry sir, but someone's calling me on the other line...I really appreciate all of your help. Can I give you a call later on?"

"Oh, I'm sorry. Go ahead and take the call. I got a bunch of cases to work on anyways...Give me a call anytime."

"Ok, cool. I appreciate all your help, sir. You have a wonderful day!" Darnisha hung up the phone, jumped out of the bed with full zest and energy, now ready to start her day. Between Tahmir's death and now the potential for her to secure another bag through the gofundme account, her migraine seemingly disappeared.

"God is good, damn!" she chuckled, making her way into the bathroom. She showered, got dressed, grabbed her a hot flamin cheetos snack bag out the kitchen, and made her way out the door, ready to go do some more shopping for her crib.

Chapter Thirty-One

Days earlier...

Learning his lesson not to speed through unknown, rural terrain, Gemini paced his way on the empty two lane highway, going the speed limit to get to Houston by 5PM. By this point it was nearly noon, and the two since their escape from the Nadine were halfway to H-town. Tasia, still fucked up from her week long ordeal, slowly opened her eyes and saw that she was still in the BMW. This wasn't a dream. This was still very much real, and thankfully nothing crazy happened...at least not yet.

She looked over at Gemini, and saw he was focused on the road ahead, looking stern and serious. She didn't want to bother him, so she stared out into the window, her eyes absorbing the vast, arid fields of mountains that touched the sunny blue skies. Her life was like a movie. A psychological thriller at that – filled with so much turbulence, turmoil, suspense and action. But this was a movie she didn't want to be the lead actress in. She'd rather much be back in Chicago, in school, hanging out with Marcia, going to the gym, etc. – normal young teenage girl shit.

Finally she opened her mouth, "Hey...Can I use your phone to call my friend?"

"No..." Gemini quickly spat without even giving much thought or consideration to her request. He didn't even give her eye contact when he slapped her with his flat out refusal.

"Why not? I need to let my fri—"

"My phone is for emergency purposes. I only use it for two things. Calling the squad and calling boss. That's it. No if's, and,s or buts," Gemini interrupted. "You hungry?" Gemini suddenly turned his attention off the road and to Tasia and smiled.

"How much longer we got? I just wanna get home," her voice cracked. Sensing she was about to possibly cry, Gemini turned the radio blaring an old Gucci Mane mixtape. "We're about a good hour away from Austin. If you could hold out, I know this good ass barbeque restaurant. Don't worry Tasia. I'm taking you back to Chicago. Just be patient," he assured her.

“Ok,” she responded. The truth was all she wanted to know was what happened to Tahmir. Did he have his arraignment? Was he free? Before Detective Speights got his claws on her, Marcia and her, as crazy and ironic as it sounds, planned for a remote possibility that something would happen to her. And if that was the case Marcia had a back up of the video footage to give to Mr. Liebowitz. She’d just hoped despite her not showing up, Marcia did as they planned and hopefully got Tahmir out of jail.

In the midst of her wrangling over Tahmir, Tasia was curious to know more about Gemini though. Where’d he get that name from? Who exactly was he? She knew he and the rest of his deceased squad were contract killers, but wanted to know more. Shit, she even wanted to know who exactly was the man who’d kidnapped her? How in the fuck did she even end all the way up in New Mexico? Also, why did they get into the shoot out days ago and who was trying to kill him and the team? She had a flood of questions, but knowing he seemed a bit short with her, she wanted to take her time asking.

“Can I ask you a question?”

“Sure – wassup?”

“Who was that trying to kill us back at the hotel?”

“I think it was that fuckin’ Brother 7X…”

“Brother 7X? Who is that?” Tasia hearing that name automatically thought about Malcolm X and the Nation of Islam. A bow tie wearing, bean pie selling Muslim was trying to kill a drug cartel enforcer?

“Yeah, he’s this crazy ass nigga from LA who goes around trying to kill hittas. But don’t worry, I already took care of his ass.”

“Oh ok…Ok just another question…Why they call you Gemini? Is that your real name?”

“’Cuz my birthday on June 1st…And crazy enough I got two sides to me.”

“What you mean?”

Gemini chuckled… “You askin’ a lot of questions, lil mama. Just sit back, try to get more sleep.” Gemini then turned up the volume on the car radio and tuned Tasia out. She fell back into the plush leather seat and turned her eyes back out into the passing dry west Texas terrain.

An hour passed. Gemini and Tasia arrived in Austin. After stopping to get gas, Gemini drove straight to Lem’s BBQ, one of the oldest BBQ joints he’d visit often anytime he came into town. Standing in line, getting ready to order food, Tasia searched the menu. Now that the smell of smoked meats, brown sugar baked beans and garlic toast invaded her nostrils, she was willing to cast aside her strict diet and get the fuck down. Amped and excited, she reverted back into being the fat girl she used to be.

“What you want ma’am?” the cashier smiled and asked Tasia.

“Can I get the three meat platter! Umm, I’d like to have brisket, sausage and chicken wings. Oh, and for my sides, can I have cole slaw, baked beans, sweet potato casserole and an extra side of garlic toast?”

Gemini, standing off to her side, chuckled, “Damn, lil mama, you about to eat the entire joint!”

She shyly laughed and rolled her eyes, “You ever been forced to eat dog food?!?” Tasia laughingly growled.

Gemini’s mouth dropped. Damn, those sick white racist muhfuckas back in New Mexico fed this girl dog food, he wondered. He grabbed their glasses and made their way to the soda machines. Gemini handed Tasia her glass, and as she was about to fill her glass with sweet tea, out the corner of her eyes she saw a man, looking and sounding drunk as shit, screaming and crying into a raggedy blue pay phone.

“Fff-ffine theen, you ole byeetch! I’m leeh’in yo ass!” The 70-year-old hunched over, drunk ass nigga hung up the phone and stumbled his way to the men’s bathroom. “Gemini, there’s a pay phone. Can I use it?!?” Tasia understood Gemini’s reasons for not wanting to use the pay phone. In fact, she perfectly understood, and if anything she didn’t want to do anything that might have someone trace and track them down and kill them. After damn near losing her life in a shootout, she didn’t want to take that risk no more.

Gemini looked suspicious and stern. “I don’t know, sis...Let me think about it while we eat, ok?”

“Ok!” Tasia finished filling her glass with sweet tea, and the two grabbed their food, and made their way over to a booth. They’d spent the next hour or so grubbing down like two hungry bears that had just woke up from a six month hibernation in the forest. They laughed and joked with each other about just how hungry they were and the fuckery that went down in Nadine. Gemini had told Tasia the night they got pulled over, although the highway patrol managed to get a bullet to graze the side of his head, he didn’t get hit. In fact, he had on a bulletproof vest, and truth be told he slept in one always. He joked that Smoke and JoJo always made fun of him for being extra super-paranoid, but his laughs turned dark and cold just reminiscing over his lost niggas.

Quickly looking to change the subject, Gemini asked Tasia about what exactly happened and how in the fuck she even ended up getting sold off. Although she didn’t give much detail, Gemini was just thrown back and disgusted at everything – wondering how in the fuck a bitch like Darnisha could do such a thing to a child simply over money.

Gemini vowed to Tasia once they got into Chicago, he was going to hunt down Darnisha and Tre, and make their asses disappear.

Once they got done eating, Gemini stood up, hands on his waist.

He gave in, “Just one phone call, ok?”

“Thanks! Thank you so much!” Tasia jumped out of her seat, lunged at Gemini and hugged him tightly. “Damn! Girl!” He busted out laughing, “Shit you got some strength! You do jiu jitsu or some shit!??”

“How’d you know?!?”

“I used to be in the Marines. I know all about jiu jitsu…Trust me.”

The two then walked over to the pay phone. Tre had some extra quarters jangling in his pocket for highway tolls. He handed Tasia a dollar’s worth of quarters, and once she picked up the phone, she quickly inserted the quarters and then as she was about to dial Marcia’s number, she got suddenly got confused.

“What?”

“Shit, I don’t know how to use no pay phone…”

“What!??” Gemini laughed. “What’s her number? You gotta dial 1 first then put the area code.”

“Got it!” Tasia then rapidly dialed away. After about four rings, Marcia’s phone picked up.

“Hello… Who’s this?” The voice on the other end didn’t sound recognizable at first to Tasia, but then it hit her – it was Marcia’s mom.

“Ohhh, Mrs. Gonzalez! This is Tasia! Marcia’s friend! Is she there?”

“Ahhhhh! Oh my god. Pobrecita!” Mrs. Gonzalez wailed on the other end. Tasia could hear Marcia’s mom cry and let out the sharpest wails. “We have been trying to reach you! We had no idea where you were! Oh my god! Ay dios mio!”

“I know, I’m so sorry…Something bad happened to me, I can’t explain it now, but I just need to talk to Marcia to let her know I’m ok…”

Mrs. Gonzalez continued to weep, and as the cries intensified, Tasia sensed something was wrong.

“Tasia…Marcia died…”

“WHAT?!? What do you mean she died?!?” Tasia’s heart dropped into her stomach. Her chest tightened and her breathing raced. Tears began swelling in her eyes as she quivered holding the pay phone.

“There was a gang shooting at her school…She was on life support for a day, but was brain dead, so we had to take her off…I’m so sorry Tasia. I’m so sorry, pobrecita. We tried to figure out a way to call you but we had no idea. We only had the number in her cell phone, but no one picked up. It went straight to voicemail.”

Tasia suddenly dropped the pay phone and collapsed, but before she could hit the ground, Gemini standing next to her side, caught her and hugged her. As she wept uncontrollably in her embrace, Gemini rocked her back and forth, “Shhh, shhh, shhh, baby girl…Everything is

gonna be alright...Come on, let's get out of here."

Gemini then slowly walked her out of the restaurant and to the car. Once he got her inside, they took off on the e-way. In the car, just thinking about everything, everything coming at her a million miles per hour, she felt numb. She felt bad not being able to give Mrs. Gonzalez her condolences and say goodbye, but she felt even worse knowing that her friend was gone and she'd never see her again. Didn't even have a chance to go to her funeral and say goodbye. Back on the highway, Tasia stared back out in the window, her mind absorbing the blue sky's expanse as her salty tears escaped the ducts of her eyes and down to her shirt. Beginning to sob again, Gemini looked over at her and rubbed her shoulders. He huffed, "I usually don't do this, but open up my glove compartment and get that brown box out of there."

Tasia, wailing and her head pounding in agony and grief, opened the glove compartment, pulled out the brown box and handed it to Gemini. He opened it up, and instantly the entire car wreaked of the loudest marijuana. He already had a few blunts assembled, ready to smoke. He slapped the blunt in his mouth, took out a lighter, and lit the dro up, taking a few puffs. He passed the blunt to Tasia, "Here, this will help," he promised. She shook her head no, "I'm good."

"No, go ahead. It'll help...Trust me, lil mama. I've seen it all. The green will take your mind away."

Doing as Gemini instructed, she cautiously took the blunt out of his hand, took a puff. She began coughing hard. Gemini laughed, "Just take your time with it. Take a few more puffs and drink some water."

Seconds later, Gemini was spot on. The THC took her away. She got lost into the sky's clouds, and within the minutes, with a stomach full of food, she faded away into sleep.

Chapter Thirty-Two

A few weeks prior …

2:25 PM – A brand new black Jeep Grand Cherokee with all tinted windows and black gun metal rims slowly paced its way down the street facing the main front entrance of Daley Tech High School on the city's southwest side. Moving in a stealth like manner, the black SUV pulled off to the side and parked in a long line of vehicles idle, waiting to pick up students. The school was minutes away from letting out for the day. Bass-heavy trap music mixed with the Cherokee's rumbling exhaust, faintly echoing down the narrow, two-way street.

"Yo, hit up Cato and tell him we outside!" mumbled Poot, sitting leaned back in the driver's seat of the truck, staring out his window, his beady reddened eyes fixed to the light blue front doors of the high school.

"Bet," said Pac, one of the guys sitting in the right backseat of the SUV. He whipped out his iPhone and shot Cato a text message. "We outside. You with her?"

Seconds later, a text message shot back from Cato. "Yeah. Wit her now. Be outside and by the spot in five…"

"He wit her," Pac shot back to Poot.

"Aiight. Keemo, you ready youngin'?" Poot looked in the rear-view mirror, seeing if his other guy seated in the left backseat was prepared to put in some work.

"Been ready!" Keemo smiled and growled in his raspy deep voice. The scratching in his tone was a sign he smoked blunts back to back all day long. Lil Keemo reached down with his tatted up right hand and pulled up a black Glock 19 resting comfortably between his feet. Then he pulled out an extended clip from his pocket, loaded it up into the pistol, cocked it, ready to fire the blicky.

As the countdown began in his head, Keemo admired his tool of death. It was a birthday gift from his nigga Bunk. The young hitta pulled the gun up to his mouth and blew into its barrel. He grinned, revealing his scary and vicious smile. His crooked teeth plated in flashy gold bounced off the dark tinted back passenger window.

Lil Keemo unzipped his black "M.M.G. Boyz" hoodie down to the

top of his stomach, and then rolled up his sleeves, exposing to the world his thicky veiny, brown muscular forearms covered in a sleeve of fading tattoos. The top of his hand holding his Glock was covered in a huge black skull engulfed in red blazing flames. Scar tissue thickened the tattoo, making it look three dimensional – further intensifying the illumination of death and destruction in his young hands. Days earlier, after tracing down Tasia's whereabouts, getting ready to sell her off to Zach Gadowsky, he hit up gang'nem to do a hit on Tasia's friend, Marcia. Given that Tasia possibly armed her bestie with information possibly incriminating Darnisha in a crime, he couldn't risk her getting arrested. If Darnisha got busted, there very well was the possibility he'd get busted too. And if Tre ended up in jail, he knew he was a dead man walking. He'd be exposed in the media as a corrupt cop, and once inside the pen, he'd be a target for rivals and maybe even some of his own gang members who'd automatically view him as a snitch. As for Marcia though, since Tre was able to track down Tasia's whereabouts and knew she was staying with her friend, Marcia was a walking liability – liable to bump her young ass pink gums to the jakes.

The MMG Boyz – or the Money Munna Gang, was one of the most notorious, well feared gang sets on the south side of Chicago. These niggas were nothing but a squad of hittas, so all it took was a brick of purple kush, a stack and some stripper pussy to convince Lil Keemo to do a hit on Marcia.

"You wanna chill later on tonight at my crib?" Cato, also a MMG boy, was sitting inside his history class, doing his best to trick the unassuming Marcia to chill with him later tonight. Since Cato ironically and unfortunately went to the same high school as Marcia, and even shared a class with her, he was going to be used as a decoy.

"Ehh, I don't know. I got stuff to do. I gotta head downtown to meet up with one of my friends…" Marcia responded, hesitant to even consider the idea of hanging with someone who she knew for sure roamed the streets.

Marcia wasn't ugly at all, but because she was raised in a strict religious house, her Mexican catholic mother wouldn't dare allow her to have a boyfriend, let alone even hang out with a boy, especially someone whose appearance screamed trouble and recklessness.

"Ahh, come on…I ain't on that bullshit like the rest of those guys. Besides, I wanted to talk to you 'bout college and shit. I'm thinkin' 'bout goin' down to Atlanta for school and shit. How 'bout you?" Cato asked, pretending as if he was interested at all in going to school. That nigga had every intention actually to NOT go to college – he'd rather much spend his time in the streets, working on upping his clout. And what he was doing this afternoon was an assignment that would for

sure increase his rep in the streets.

Marcia still wasn't taking Cato seriously. As she sat in her seat across from him, she'd even wondered what in the fuck made him even show interest in her. She already knew something shady was going on. She'd known DaQuan "Cato" Williams since elementary school, and by "known," they just so happened to have gone to the same schools since the age of seven. As far as she could remember, Cato was never a "school" guy. She knew he was in the streets heavy, and outside of sleeping in class, that is when he managed to show up, all he did was talk to and ultimately put his dirty dick in all the young, thirsty, dick dumb THOT bitches in the school. Yup dirty, because Cato stayed sliding in and out of these nasty and dick desperate young bitches, and rumor had it he gave Sharkeyvia Wilkins, the school's super-THOT, a bad case of herpes last year.

Marcia rolled her eyes and closed a TD Jakes book she was reading. "Really?" Was Cato bullshitting her about his college pipe dreams? "What school in Atlanta?" she questioned. She was curious enough to see if he'd actually say a school that actually existed.

"Clark Atlanta. My oldest brother went there for some time. It's cool as shit down in the A?"

"What you wanna study?"

"Shit…For real though?" Cato chuckled, playing the part really. "Political science. I think I wanna become a lawyer and shit. Free the guys. Help bring broski'nem back home…"

Marcia laughed – but she was really laughing at him, not with him because she knew deep down inside he was bullshitting him.

"Why you laughin'? For real tho…You think I'm a dumb ass, huh? Don't let me sleepin' in class fool you. I know some shit. For real tho…," he continued.

Doing his best to slowly convince the girl he wasn't some typical young street nigga tryin to use his words to finesse her out of her untapped virgin pussy, he continued chopping it up with her.

The school bell rang. Suddenly there was a rush of students to the classroom door, looking to get the fuck out of the school as soon as possible. The anxiety and excitement for school ending for the day was so thick in the air, you could cut it with a knife and spread it over a piece of bread. Marcia quickly gathered her belongings and made her way out he class, but Cato was still by her side. By this point she just wanted to tell Cato to leave her the fuck alone , but she was slowly giving in to his conversation.

She was kind of in awe though that someone who had such a notorious rep in school actually had a thought-out plan when it came to college. Although she still wasn't taking him seriously, she was a bit flattered by just how the deep the conversation got. She never thought

in a thousand years Cato would even have this type of convo with her, let alone a conversation about school.

As the two walked side by side, still talking to each other, squeezing their way through the crowded school hallway, Cato wrapped his arm around her shoulders as they walked towards the front entrance of the highschool. Marcia suddenly found herself a tad nervous. Despite being damn near seventeen, she never had a boy get that physical with her. Feeling the hardness of his muscular tatted arms, matched with his aggressive game, she couldn't resist that "womanly" urge – the feeling of when a relatively attractive man shows interest. That shit is hardwired into every female's biology, Marcia was no different.

Finally outside, Marcia looked at Cato, "Fine…What time you wanna link up?"

"Maybe around 7?"

"That could work…like I said, I gotta jet downtown to go meet up with a friend."

Marcia had no idea where exactly all of this was gonna go. She was kindling with a fire of inner-rebellion, and she was already coming up with an "excuse" she was going to give her mom of why she was out past her curfew. Shit, in her mind, the young teen figured you only live one – gotta give certain things a try. And what she was about to try was just getting innocent, casual attention from a boy.

As the two walked down the side walk, trekking closer and closer to the black SUV, butterflies grew in Cato's stomach. He knew the hit was about to go down any second now, and he needed to make sure he got good cover. The plan was once the truck started up and he saw Poot's window roll down, Lil Keemo was going to let his window down and let the blicky off into the crowd, aiming straight at Marcia, making sure she caught most of the bullets.

Inside the truck, Poot could see Cato and the "target" getting closer and closer. After taking four long pulls from the biggest kush blunt he'd ever rolled, he passed it to Lil Keemo. The young assassin took the deepest pull and held the smoke inside of his lungs for damn near ten seconds, guaranteeing every single THC molecule saturated and numbed his soulless body. Like a dragon, the young hitta released a long and thick plume of smoke from his wide nostrils, staring out his window, his eyes watching Cato and Marcia get closer and closer.

He passed the blunt to Pac, ash fell on parts of his hoodie and his True Religions. He quickly brushed the ash off of himself, onto the SUV's floor. He cracked his thick, ashy knuckles. "Let's move…" Keemo growled. Poot started up the Cherokee, and slowly moved, but a bit faster. Poot rolled down his window, making immediate eye contact with Cato.

"….Yeah, you know, I know it's gonna be a challenge, but I'm gonna – OH SHIT!" Suddenly Cato ducked and hopped over a raised cement flower bed, getting cover. With the way Cato moved so quickly, Marcia had no idea what was happening. She immediately froze in place, and then scanned around, before eventually her eyes registered Keemo, staring her down from the back seat of the truck the Glock aimed at her. "Ughh!" Her mouth dropped, and released her bookbag in her hand. Before she could get cover herself –

POW! POW! POW! POW! POW! POW! POW! POW! POW! POW! POW! POW! POW! POW! POW! POW! POW! POW! POW! POW! POW! POW! POW! POW! POW!

A rapid, echoing blast of bullets unloaded from the barrel of Keemo's gun. Bronze shells flew and fell all over the place, bouncing off the pot-hole ridden street and school's sidewalk. and bouncing around on the concrete pavement as each round is fired.

"AHHH! AHHHHHH!" Screams and yells resonated from the mouths of young bystanders. Many ran for cover, but some were hit, instantly falling to the ground, lying motionless.

Once Keemo got done emptying his clip, the SUV blasted down the street and disappeared. Once students and other bystanders realized the shooting was done, Cato dashed from his cover and lunged towards a motionless Marcia, laid out on the sidewalk, her arms spread apart, her seemingly lifeless body floating in a massive pool of her crimson blood.

Per Tre's instructions, he needed to grab her bookbag and dip the fuck off and head back to the set. He did just that, taking her bag, and dipping the fuck out, not possessing even a tiny crumb of remorse for what he'd just done to the innocent girl. Her phone, inches away from her scraped up right hand, buzzed. It was her phone's Bible app sending her daily scripture… Romans 8:28. *"…And we know that God causes everything to work together for the good of those who love God and are called according to his purpose for them."*

Chapter Thirty-Three

Tre sat in a diner, sipping black coffee, reading a copy of the New York Times he'd purchased from a gas station before stopping for breakfast. Waiting for his stack of pancakes and side of bacon , he flipped through the pages of the thick newspaper, absorbing everything that was going on.

"Hey Wanda Jean! I'll have the usual…" Two older white New Mexico highway patrolman bumbled inside the diner and sat in a booth in front of Tre. The two officers gave Tre eye contact – guessed they'd never a black guy in person before. Tre didn't think much of it. He just nodded his head and went back to sipping his coffee and reading the newspaper, looking at the latest crazy coming out of Trump world. Tre then thought to himself those cops were probably some Trump voting cracka ass crackas, and that's probably why they looked at him funny.

"What ya'll eating? The usual?" the waitress, Wanda Jean waltzed over and asked the cops what they were eating for breakfast.

"You got it!" Wanda Jean, already knowing their favorite, walked back to the kitchen and placed their order.

"So…you heard about the nigras who were involved in that shootout? The Feds are goin' crazy. They think the cartels are moving in big time. Shit is changin' around here…." One of the highway patrolman said as he sipped on a glass of water.

Tre's ears instantly tuned into their conversation…Nigras? Tre knew these honkies were talking about black folks. The two officers didn't make mention of anything else, but Tre suspected that if there some sort of massive shootout and "nigras" were involved, it had to be Christopher McRay and his team.

After Tre got done, he paid for his meal, and hopped in his rental. Before he took off, he tried to find any mention of shootouts in New Mexico online and he stumbled across an article from a local online publication – The Rosewell Reader. Apparently, there was a massive shootout between rival drug cartels and an African American female suspect was shot and killed. Days later, local police believed an African American's body found outside of the town of Nadine, was

involved in the shooting. The Feds believe that the two suspects were also involved in execution-style murders of Nadine's Chief of Police along with two town officers. Crazy enough, the article made mention that the Chief of Police was under federal investigation for taking bribes and had some possible links to a cartel.

Tre phoned one of his buddies who worked for the FBI back in Chicago, and then eventually got into contact with a local agent working on the case of the two "African American suspects with cartel ties". Tre headed to a local FBI office in Rosewell – about a good two-hour drive east of Albuquerque.

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"Detective Speights?" Agent McCullough greeted, the FBI agent assigned to the case, greeted Tre and escorted him into his plush, well furnished office.

Agent McCullough sat behind his desk, and Tre sat down in a seat in front of it. "So what brings you down to New Mexico?"

"I'm investigating the disappearance of a young black woman….Her name is Tasia Johnson. We think she was possibly kidnapped by a drug trafficker and enforcer from Texas."

"Not surprising…So many young girls end up in the hands of pimps and drug traffickers. A lot of them find their way coming through New Mexico on their way to Texas coming from Vegas or LA or vice versa – coming from the South or the Midwest going to LA. Fucking crazy…"

Tre pulled out his phone and showed Agent McCullough a picture of JoJo he cropped and blew up. He did that deliberately so McCullough wouldn't know where he got the picture from. "Does she look familiar?" Tre held the phone up to McCullough's face. The stern looking young white agent leaned forward, squinted his eyes, trying his best to assess the picture. "That might be our Jane Doe…Wow. Where'd you get that from?"

"Outside a school. How about this?" Tre then showed the agent a picture of Smoke.

"Fuck! That's our John Doe! Let's go take a trip downstairs…"

~

Dr. Gacy, the local FBI forensic pathologist, pulled the white sheet off Smoke and JoJo's bodies as they lay on examination tables.

"Jane Doe died from a massive 12-gauge shot gun wound to her chest. John Doe died from multiple shots ringing out from an AR-15. We found John Doe's body about a good 40 miles away from Jane's.

The shootout happened at a Holiday Inn. We think there was a third person with them who managed to get away. The Holiday Inn's cameras were cut. However, we interviewed a local prostitute who said Jane Doe busted into her room with another black girl – both of them were armed." McCullough said as he went through his notes on a tablet in his hand.

Tre's eyes turned to slits as his heart pounded with full anxiety. He knew right then and there "McGray" and Tasia were definitely on their way back to Chicago – and Darnisha, and possibly he were on their hit list. "Dr. Gacy, does John or Jane have any tattoos that might indicate gang or street organization affiliation?"

"Yeup, take a look at this…" The young white female doctor lifted Smoke's right arm and showed him a faded tattoo of a pyramid that had a dollar sign sitting on top of an AK-47.

"Yeah, I tried checking our gang symbol and tattoo database. Nothing came up…" McCullough affirmed as he fumbled through his tablet.

Tre gulped… "I appreciate the information…I'll take this back to Chicago. We'll be in touch." Tre reached out and went to give McCullough a handshake. Not wanting to come off ass to inquisitive, better yet "too knowledgable", Tre quickly made his way out of the Rosewell FBI office and to his rental.

Once inside, he chucked up the engine, and before he threw the car in drive, he started punching the steering wheel like it was a punching bag, "FUCK! FUCK! FUCK! FUCK!"

Beads of sweat rolled down his face, and his breathing became fast and shallow. He whipped out his phone and called Darnisha…She wasn't picking up… "FUCK!" Tre immediately threw the car and drive and made his way back to the airport, looking the catch the first flight out of New Mexico.

He had to. He understood now who he was going against – Tahmir's gang.

Chapter Thirty-Four

3 PM – “Yo, wake up, lil mama! We made it!” Tasia slowly opened her hazy eyes, and immediately her pupils latched onto the vast Downtown cityscape. Her heart pumped hard and her breathing became shallow and fast as she filled with excitement knowing she was finally back home in Chicago.

Gemini had already told Tasia they were going to stay with some of his relatives out on the West Side. Gemini was actually born in Chicago, but when he was five, his mother left his father and moved down to Houston, although he’d come back and forth to Chicago during the summers and some holidays. About a good thirty minutes later, the pair made their way to Humboldt Park on the city’s north west side. It was crazy too because although Tasia spent all her life in Chicago, she’d never seen this part of the city. It was a far contrast from her native, predominantly black South Side.

Humboldt Park was filled with a bunch of Puerto Ricans and Dominicans. Latin restaurants, salsa clubs and bars lined the streets. Latin music could be heard rumbling through cars along North Avenue, making Tasia fill like she was somewhere in the Caribbean, not the Midwest. “We’re here…” Gemini pulled into the driveway of a massive brownstone mansion.

Gemini and Tasia got out the BMW and made their way to the gothic gawdy front door of the house. Gemini took a deep breath and rang the doorbell. Seconds later, the door opened and a tall, fair skinned older man with wavy hair and a pair of gold-rimmed glasses stared Gemini up and down. “Cristóbal! Ay mi hijo!” the older men cried and then lunged at Gemini, hugging him tightly. “Papi!” Gemini returned the hug, crying himself.

“Come on in! I didn’t know you were coming to Chicago! Oh my god my son!” Gemini’s father let him into the house. Talking in Spanish with his father, Tasia instantly became fucking confused. She didn’t even realize Gemini was Spanish. She’d just assumed he was a regular ass nigga from Houston. Then again, there were plenty of niggas in Latin America, and by the looks of Gemini’s father, she knew they were either Puerto Rican or Dominican.

Gemini introduced Tasia to his father as they walked deeper and deeper into the dimly lit hallways of the mansion. Making their way into the living room, Gemini and Tasia sat on one couch and his father on another. “I’m so glad I get to see you my son! So glad! Oh my God. Ay dios mio! It’s been like what? Five years?”

“Si, papi. Around five years. Work been busy…”

“I know…I know my son. But my son, I have some terrible news to give you.”

“What’s that?”

“It’s about your hermano, Tahmir.” Hermano means brother in spanish. “El está muerto…”

“What?!? How papi!!?!?” Suddenly Gemini busted out crying, tears flying out of his face like North Korean missiles. Tasia for a second was frozen, but if she thought what she thought she heard, she was in for a crazy ass surprise.

“He died in a fire a few days ago. He was locked up in Cook County Jail and a fire had broke out.”

“Papi! I am so confused right now. I thought Tahmir was in prison?!?” Gemini shouted, tears running marathons down his cheeks.

“Wait…What?!? Excuse me, sir, but did you say the name Tahmir?” Tasia’s eyes widened in surprise and angst. “Tahmir Thompkins?!?”

Gemini, angered and visibly upset by hearing the devastating news, looked at Tasia to his side with fury fuming from his eyes. “What!?!? How do you know Tahmir?!?”

Tasia’s eyes began to swell, her body quivered. This was all one crazy ass coincidence. “Ohmygod, Ohmygod! He was my aunt’s boyfriend! She got him put in jail, and then she had me kidnapped by that detective I was telling you about!”

“What!?!” Gemini and his father sat there shocked and taken aback. “You’ve got to be fucking kidding me!?!?

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What a fucking crazy ass coincidence, huh? Tasia found herself being freed by a man who was Tahmir’s younger half-brother. After the commotion and crazy mass confusion settled, Gemini had explained to Tasia that his father back in the day was one of the biggest Dominican drug lords in Chicago, and Tahmir Thompkins-Perez, better known as “King T” was his right hand man. Gemini, his real name Christopher or Cristobal, had worked for his father and Tahmir as their enforcer, and that right after high school, to help out with the family business, he enlisted in the Marines to learn how to become a sharpshooter.

When Tahmir went to prison, their father, whose real name was

Pedro Perez, also known as “El Jefe”, Spanish for the Chief, decided to close up shop and go legit. Gemini ended up permanently staying in Houston, and worked for a mob boss. And that explained how he ended up rescuing her from Zach’s house. With Tahmir in prison and his father wanting to remain low key, Gemini said he had not talked or visited his family in years.

After Tasia explained her story, and how she knew Tahmir, she came to the bittersweet realization that her life was no essentially pointless. She learned a few days ago a massive explosion and fire killed a bunch of people, including Tahmir and they’d recovered his body. The funeral was coming up in a few days. Hearing all this news, knowing her crazy ass aunt ultimately led to his downfall and demise, was sending Tasia to the threshold of suicide. She didn’t know if life was worth living at all. After grieving for the next few hours, trying to sort everything out, Gemini and his pops made dinner and did their best to rekindle their relationship.

Tasia on the other hand – her mind completely blanked out – was just ready to end it all. She couldn’t care anymore. Marcia was dead. Tahmir was dead. Those two were the only people she cared for and loved. After barely eating some dinner, taking a shower, and preparing herself to sleep in one of the mansion’s guest rooms, she found an unopened bottle of Aspirin in a medicine cabinet and swallowed the entire thing with ease. She climbed into the huge plush bed, closed her eyes, and began to feel extreme, immobilizing nausea overtake her body. She said a prayer, gulped and just let go, hoping the aspirin would fade her into eternal oblivion.

Chapter Thirty-Five

"Yassss! Bish! Look at my crib! I told you I was gettin' out the muhfuckin' projects and shit!" Darnisha was inside her new crib, showing her bestie Shatoya her new posh luxury apartment off in the Gold Coast. The apartment building a massive high rise right off the lake, and Darnisha got exactly everything she wanted. Shit was like fucking heaven – her gutter hoe dream was now a reality.

"Damn, girl! How much is this place per month?!?" Shatoya walked around the vast living room, absorbing her bestie's new crib, stunned that she was able to pull off and get the voucher. The two friends had just come back from the grocery store loaded up with chips, buffalo wings, liquor, and other party food. Tonight Darnisha was throwing a huge kickback and she was inviting a few of the bitches and niggas from the hood to come crash at the crib. Darnisha, despite Mrs. Watkins' stern warning not to cause ruckus in the building, was completely oblivious to the fact she was about to storm the upper middle class high rise with a bunch of hood rats who were liable to fight and shoot if shit went awry – but of course didn't care. She had money now – lots of it. And she also had her a new nigga – Tre – and she just assumed if she went south, he was gonna be there as a back up.

As Darnisha and Shatoya got situated in the crib, within seconds, there was a loud, thunderous pounce at the door. "CHICAGO POLICE DEPARTMENT! OPEN UP!"

"Tha fuck!?!?" Darnisha dropped the grocery bags in her hand, and looked at Shatoya with crazed, widened eyes as if she heard a bomb go off. Shatoya just stood there, frozen. "CHICAGO POLICE DEPARTMENT! OPEN UP THE DOOR OR ARE WE ARE GONNA BUST THIS SHIT IN!" The officer's loud voice growled through the thick apartment front door.

"Shit, girl! What the fuck is going on?!?" Darnisha trembled and then quickly made her way to the front door. Once she opened it up, she saw an army of police officers, guns pointed at her, ready to shoot if they had to. "DARNISHA JOHNSON?!?"

"Yess?" Darnisha stammered as she raised her hands in the air.

“YOU’RE UNDER ARREST!” Two female officers suddenly grabbed Darnisha, quickly spun her on her feet, grabbed her hands and threw her up against the wall.

Shatoya walked up to Darnisha, her hands covering her mouth in shock and surprise as to what was going on. Tears fell from her eyes and she shook her head as she watched Darnisha get handcuffs slapped on her hands.

“WHAT THE FUCK YA’LL ARRESTING ME FOR?!?!?” Darnisha screamed in pain, feeling those handcuffs bite into her yellow wrists.

“You’re under arrest for three counts of attempting to defraud a financial institution! You have the right to remain silent. Anything you say can and will be used against you in a court of law. You have the right to an attorney. If you cannot afford an attorney, one will be provided for you. Do you understand the right I have just read to you?” One of the female officers read Darnisha her Miranda rights as a few other officers patted her down. As more and more officers flooded the apartment, quickly searching and scanning the area, looking for treasure troves of evidence, Darnisha’s eyes reddened in fear and rage, wondering how in the fuck someone even caught on to her cracking credits and what not.

Shatoya, standing off to the side, silent like a muhfucka, just kept shaking her head in disbelief. Suddenly one the police detectives inside the apartment walked up to Shatoya, “Thank you. You can leave now. Do you need a ride back to your house?”

Darnisha, looking out the corner of her eye, hearing the conversation, went crazy. “What?!? THANK YOU?!? BITCH YOU SET ME UP!?!? YOU SET ME UP HOE?!?! BITCH YOU GOT ME FUCKED UP!”

“I’m sorry ‘Nisha! I’m sorry!” Shatoya cried, still reeling in disbelief at what was happening, and happening so quickly before her very own eyes.

“BITCH I GOT YOU! I GOT YOU BITCH! JUST WATCH!”

“Get her ignorant ass out of here!” The detective commanded the female officers to haul Darnisha away.

Downstairs, a crowd of residents formed, wondering exactly what in the fuck was going and why there was a fleet of police cars outside the building, blue lights illuminating the lobby. Darnisha was escorted out the building, looking fucking angry, ready to figure out a way how she was gonna get someone to fuck Shatoya’s ass up.

The police took her down to a local station and began processing her arrest paperwork. After they got done, they then transferred her down to a temporary detention center since a large part of Cook County Jail burned to the ground.

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“Johnson….You can make your phone call now,” barked the big, thick black female corrections officer into Darnisha’s cell she was sharing with three other bitches wearing bright orange jumpsuits. The guard opened the door, and Darnisha walked out, arms folded, looking nervous and sick to her damn rotten, soulless core.

Darnisha’s stomach was twisted up into all types of knots, still trying to wrap her ratchet, trifling brain cells around everything that happened hours earlier. She couldn’t believe her own BFF, Shatoya, a bitch that was supposed to be her ride or die, would snitch on her to the police and get her arrested. Especially over some shit she was very much involved in her damn self. She needed to know the full details of how she even got busted. Apparently, she was about to be arraigned on charges related to cracking credit cards and writing bad checks. All them years, her, Shatoya and a few other bitches down in the projects worked cohesively to bilk people and banks. It was an easy way for those bitches to come up and not have to go out and get a real ass job like normal people do.

Bitches like Darnisha and Shatoya were allergic to real jobs though. But now that Darnisha found herself in the grips of the law, possibly on her way to prison for a long ass time if she didn’t figure out how to free herself from this situation, she was slowly beginning to regret everything. Suddenly this bitch found Jesus, and if she had the ability to travel back into time, she’d go all the way back, even before she even had her kids, and do what was necessary to live just a normal ass life. Finish high school. Go to college. Get a degree and then get a good ass job. But instead her ass got caught the fuck up dealing with niggas in the streets. Oh well. A hard head makes a soft ass. And a bought lesson is better than a taught lesson. Darnisha’s ass was gon learn the fuck today!

Now that she’d spent so many years of ripping people off, on top of the other trifling gutter shit she was doing, karma was being a mean ass ruthless bitch to her. Making her way to the jail phone, she picked it up and quickly dialed Tre’s cell phone number.

Rapidly tapping her foot against the dirty ass jail floor, she impatiently listened to the germ-covered black phone ring, hoping Tre was seconds away from picking up.

“Hello?” Tre answered.

Suddenly tears formed in Darnisha’s reddened eyes, “Tre!”

“Who this?!? DARNISHA?!? Where the fuck you been at?!? I’ve been trying to get in touch with your ass! Why you ain’t been picking up your cell phone and shit?!?! WHERE ARE YOU, WE GOTTA TALK ABOUT TAHMIR!”

“I’m LOCKED the fuck up! I’m in jail, nigga!”

“Jail!? Da fuck!?!? HOW?!?”

Darnisha began to wail, “They got me on bank fraud…Shatoya’s ass set me up…”

Tre huffed, “Ughhh…Man, come the fuck on?!? Really?!? Ok, fuck that, I’m comin’ down there now to square this shit out! Listen, don’t call no one else. Don’t say SHIT! Don’t talk to an attorney just yet!”

“Ok…Please, just come and help me!” Darnisha begged and then hung up the phone. The guard escorted her back to her jail cell. Once inside, she made her way back over to her bunk bed, jumped in it and laid down, rubbing the sides of her temples trying to stop her growing headache from spreading.

“You look familiar…Very familiar. Like I seen you before somewhere…” Darnisha suddenly opened her eyes and turned her face. A big ass butch with a low blonde fade, a mouth full of gold teeth, tatts all up and down her neck and arms, was staring her down with her eyes turned to slit.

Darnisha didn’t respond, she just started the vicious looking dike bitch down, scared as shit.

“Where you from? You stay out south, don’t you?”

“Yeah…” Darnisha stuttered.

“Hrrrm, I know you from somewhere…” The dike bitch continued squinting her eyes, examining Darnisha’s sexy ass, and then strolled off to a seat in the corner. Darnisha closed her eyes, and began massaging her temples again.

“BITCH! Wake yo ass up! You stole my bitch Ryann! Yeah, I knew that was you! Yeah, you stole my bitch and got her ass killed! PUNK ASS HOE!” Suddenly the big butch bitch wrapped her thick, tatted up hands around Darnisha’s neck and began to squeeze her trachea as hard she could, damn near snapping that shit in half.

“AY YO! Let’s come fuck this bitch up! She the bitch that set Ryann up and got her knocked off!” Then out of no where, a group of bitches in the cell dashed over to the bunk bed, and held down Darnisha’s legs. The big butch bitch then without hesitation threw blows left and right Darnisha, busting and bruising her yellow skin, breaking her face in, blood splattering all over the place.

As the group of violent bitches continued to unleash raw, unfettered violence onto Darnisha, the bank fraudster and credit card scammer slipped into dark oblivion, passing out. She just knew she was gonna die…

Chapter Thirty-Six

Knock! Knock! “Aye yo, Tasia, why you not up yet? It’s almost 10 AM. We gotta bust a lot of moves today! Wake up girl!” Gemini barked on the other side of her bedroom, wondering why in the fuck she wasn’t up yet. After waking up early as fuck as usual, Gemini showered and helped his father cook breakfast. A typical Dominican breakfast at that – eggs, fried ham, mashed plantains and French toast. The plan today was for Gemini and Tasia to hunt down Darnisha and Detective Speights, hopefully able to track down that damn video footage, and get their asses arrested. If not, Gemini told Tasia he was just going to kill those motherfuckers and then he’d come up with a plan B.

Tasia still didn’t answer Gemini’s incessant pounding at the door. A few seconds later, without even bothering to knock on the damn door again, let alone say anything else, Gemini barged into the upstairs guestroom and meandered towards her bed, a bit pissed actually. Granted, he knew she needed sleep and rest given all she went through, but time was at hand. Time was not on their side at all. They needed to get to work like ASAP. With the bed’s dark purple comforter draped over her, she laid there motionless. As Gemini got closer to her and looked down at her face, ready to shake her out of her apparent deep slumber, he quickly saw her mouth flung wide open, and she had scrunched up, uncomfortable look molded into the features of her dark brown face. Gemini took two seconds before realizing something was off – terribly wrong. He quickly pulled the comforter off her and pulled her into his tight embrace, “Tasia! Tasia, wake up baby girl! Come on, wake up!”

As he held her and rocked her, trying to get her to wake up, his eyes rapidly scanned her limber body, looking to see if she had done something to harm herself. Then he bent forward, put his left hand in the middle of her chest, and tried to listen for her heartbeat. It was extremely slow, barely pumping blood through her cold, almost blue body. Then he listened for her breathing. Shallow. “Oh my God! Baby girl! No! No! No! Please wake up! Wake the fuck up! PAPI! BEN AQUI! PAPI!” Gemini cried.

Seconds later, Gemini's father busted through the door, "What's wrong?!?"

"She's not breathing, Papi! Call 9-11! Oh my fuckin' God!"

"What?!?!?" Papi growled, and dashed towards the bed to see what was wrong. "I'm calling them now! Ya voy!" he yelled as he dashed out of the room.

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As the paramedics rushed the almost lifeless body of Tasia through the University of Chicago's Hospital emergency room, Gemini and Papi frantically trailed behind the two EMTs as they quickly escorted her through the busy, noisy hallways towards an operating room. Gemini didn't know if Tasia was truly going to make it. On the ride to the ER, The EMTs in the ambulance had to do CPR on Tasia three times to restart her heart. Strapped to the gurney, the EMTs swiftly transferred her body to a bed as nurses and doctors flooded the room. "You all need to leave so the doctors can work on her," one of the nurses, an older white woman, pulled Gemini and Papi away. Gemini, doing his best to fight back tears resisted at first, but the nurse looked at him, "It's gonna be alright, sir, the doctors are working on her now, mhrrrm-k?" she muttered, closing the door behind them and walking them down to one of the hospital's visitor waiting rooms.

Once inside the well-lit, cold, damn near fully occupied waiting room, Gemini and Papi found two empty seats far off in the corner and sat down. "It's gonna be alright, my son. It's gonna be alright. We just gotta be patient…" Papi rubbed Gemini's back, consoling him, but Gemini, filled with sorry and rage, quivered in his seat, his nerves set on fire by anxiety, wondering if his new friend was going to make it alive. He still didn't know exactly what happened to her, or what she did to herself. He just trusted whatever it was, the doctors would be able to save her, and she'd have a speedy recovery.

~

Two long, tortuous hours had passed. Gemini and Papi were still in the waiting room. As Gemini still sat in his seat, rocking back and forth, anxiety breaking his mind and spirit down, he continuously prayed silently hoping Tasia would make it. The waiting room was filled with so many other family members and relatives of people who too found themselves frightened and worried with the fate of their loved ones. Gemini, not wanting the collective, lingering fearful energy of everyone in the waiting room to invade his thoughts and tear him apart, closed his eyes and just kept praying over and over

again.

Five minutes later… A tall white older doctor with a bald head matched with piercing blue eyes, wearing the typical white doctor's coat and green medical scrubs, entered the waiting room. "Sir," the Doctor's deep and flat voice resonated the room, and his eyes fixed onto Gemini and Papi. "Son…" Papi said, tapping Gemini to get his attention. Gemini quickly opened his eyes and looked towards the doctor standing in the entrance of the waiting room. Both Gemini and Papi then jumped out of their seats and quickly made their way towards the doctor. Hopefully the emergency room doctor was carrying some good news. Hopefully….

"Doctor! Is she alright? Can we see her now?" Gemini asked with panic laced in every syllable of his plea.

The doctor huffed and lowered his head, holding his clipboard, "From what we could tell, it looks like she took an entire bottle of aspirin. We pumped her stomach out to get as much of it out of her system as possible, but she's sustained some pretty serious liver and kidney damage."

"Oh my God, but is she ok though? Can we go see her?" Gemini asked again, not even focused on the words emanating out of the doctor's mouth. The doctor with his eyes unblinking, huffed again, shook his head and tightened his lips. "Sir, we did all we could do to save her. Unfortunately, she passed away a few minutes ago. I will take you to her room."

Gemini and Papi just stood there, silent for a second. Then heavy tears flooded Gemini's slightly round and brown face, soaking his beard like a towel dipped in Lake Michigan. Although he had the growing urge to bust out crying, he just held it in, not wanting to break down in front of everyone in the waiting room. He wiped his face, and Papi continued to slowly rub his back, doing his best to console his son over receiving the devastating news. "Sorry, mi hijo, lo siento. Hopefully she's in a better place now. With God." the sympathetic father muttered as they walked behind the doctor to Tasia's room.

Gemini didn't respond though to his father's consolation. He just nodded his head in reluctant agreement, wishing that this was just a fucked up nightmare, and he'd wake up from it at any moment now. Although it was strange he was weeping over losing the young girl given that he'd only known her for a few days, he felt a connection to her like none other. He honestly didn't know why. It wasn't like he was attracted to her in a strong, romantic way. For him though, he felt robbed – robbed of truly trying to help someone in desperate need. In these few days, after hearing everything Tasia went through, and how she even grew close to his half-brother, Tahmir, he just knew she was

on the cusp of victory of getting everything she'd ever wanted. Although Tahmir was unfortunately dead too – Tasia though, she'd still be able to live a full life. Go to college. Go to law school. Meet her husband. Have kids. Normal shit anyone truly wants for themselves. He could tell she had so much going for herself despite the fact she had to endure so much – not knowing her father, losing her mother, and then worst of all losing a man she regarded as her stepfather. But then Gemini quickly realized that with all she had to overcome, that type of incessant dark tribulation can send anyone over the edge to just want to give up.

Moments later, Gemini along with his father and the doctor walked into the room. Gemini's eyes immediately latched onto Tasia's motionless, lifeless body with her arms to her side. "I'll give you all some time. Are you all her next of kin?"

Gemini, still silent, his eyes attached to Tasia who seemed to be peacefully resting, shook his head no. "I don't know…I really don't know her like that. She was kidnapped, and I rescued her."

"Oh my God! Well we need to call the police the—"

"Don't!" Gemini growled, interrupting the doctor, giving him an extremely menacing look. A look that suggested if he dared to disobey his one word order, he'd end up in the back of his trunk with his throat sliced three inches deep, so deep you'd think this nigga took a knife skills class with OJ Simpson. "Ok," the doctor fearfully responded and quickly made his way out of the room, closing the door in the process. Gemini then made his way closer to the bed, picked up Tasia's cold hand and rubbed the top of it gently, a storm of tears falling out the clouds of his reddened regretful eyes. "I'm so sorry, baby girl. I'm so sorry you did this to yourself. You deserved more than this. Oh God, if you can hear me, just make sure she's ok. This isn't fair, God. This is all the way fucked up, but it's your plan and I can't understand. But it's your plan."

Gemini wiped his face, then leaned down, and kissed her cheek. "If you can hear me, baby girl. Just know you are loved. You are loved. So many people love you. Tell Smoke, JoJo and Tahmir I said wassup and look after me while I'm still down here on this fucked up planet." Gemini smiled as more tears kept running down his face and onto his shirt. He then placed her arms back to her side and sat down for a second to gather his thoughts.

With Tasia now dead, and his brother, Gemini now understood one and one thing only – it was time to unleash all out hell and war in the Chi. Detective Speights, and everyone involved with him had to die. Darnisha was going to die. And if it meant he'd die too in the process, he was going to bring bodies with him – lots of them. He was going to burn this bitch down to the ground, making sure Tasia got due justice.

“Come on, Papi. Let’s get out of here…I got shit to do now. It’s time for war.” Gemini growled, a dark, ungodly viciousness enslaves the tone of voice letting his father know it was time to come out of retirement.

Papi understood very well what this entailed and was ready to help his son in any shape, form or fashion. “Well, if you say it’s a war son, then it’s a war. Vamos. I’ll call up the soldiers. Eye for an eye, tooth for a tooth, limb for a limb, and a life for a life.”

Gemini and Papi then slowly made their way out the room, and before Gemini exited, he turned on his feet, giving Tasia one last glance. He blew her a kiss. “Goodbye, baby girl. See you on the other side.”

Chapter Thirty-Seven

A week later…

"You're getting better and better!" Jashuan's physical therapist smiled at him, so happy and elated that he was making great strides and progress towards getting a lot of function back into his legs and arms. "Thank you…I'm tryin…I'm tryin…" Jashaun mumbled as he practiced some leg extension drills. Although he still had some issues with his mobility, Jashaun and his therapist were determined to get there. One day at a time. He had to. Now more than ever, he was committed to not let his HIV diagnosis nor the irreversible brain damage hold him back now from maximizing his potential.

Since finding out his new decrepit condition, and seeing how he no longer wanted a relationship with Darnisha (although she never really cared to have a healthy, fruitful relationship with her son in the first place), Jashaun became so self-reflective about all the fucked up shit he and his sister had done up to this point.

He was weeks now into his hospital stay and eventually he was about to be moved to a long-term rehab facility out Oak Lawn, a south suburb of the city. A few days ago, he ended up finding out that Darnisha had been arrested, and now that he just knew this was her end and prison was her next fate, her being away opened up for him so many raw emotions and feelings. Feelings of liberation and joy, but also feelings of sorrow and turbulence. Why? Because all these years, it was Darnisha's trifling, pathetic, lying, manipulative ass and her machinations that made him do the things he did. Whether it was helping her shoplift, crack credit cards, steal people's mail, prostitute himself, etc., he never had a mother, never had a role model to truly show him the right way to take in life.

With the insistence of Dr. Haughton, who was being more of a mother to him than Darnisha, Jashaun, started seeing a mental health therapist who was slowly helping him work through the myriad of his issues. Although at times he was stubborn, still showing some of his old ways, he along with everyone else realized he was a work in progress. Dr. Haughton told him, "Jashaun, the best skyscrapers aren't built over night. We're gonna get you there. Just be patient, have faith and be strong. Just know we're here, and you are loved…We are rooting for you."

~

11:25 PM…Jashaun was sitting upright in his bed, still in the hospital, watching a rerun of Martin. As Martin character's Ol' Otis the Security Officer danced across the screen, Jashaun laughed in the dark room, his eyes glued to the flat screen television.

Knock! Knock! Jashaun's attention was turned away from the television and to the unexpected knocking at the door. He screwed his face up in confusion. It was late at night, and on this level of the hospital, the only people working were the nurses and orderlies. He figured it was probably a nurse looking to check up on him. "Who is it?"

"Maintenance, we gotta do a last-minute fire inspection, sorry, sir…" The deep, country sounding voice whispered from the other side of his bedroom door. Jashaun, feeling a bit bothered, rolled his eyes and huffed, "Fine, come on in. I'm still awake." Jashaun then grabbed the TV"s remote control and turned down the volume.

Although he knew this was a public hospital and shit needed to be fixed and or maintained all the time, especially in the event of a serious emergency, he wondered why in the fuck someone would be doing these types of inspections this late at night. Shit was beyond inconsiderate, but then he quickly figured that perhaps it had to be done. It wasn't like this was an apartment building or a hotel. Shit, with the hundreds of people that stayed at the hospital, anything, any CRAZY thing could happen at any given moment. He heard about the news of Cook County Jail exploding and erupting in a massive blaze. And he couldn't imagine if some shit like that happened here at the hospital. Just thinking about dying in a massive fire like that, thousands of degrees of heat and flames melting flesh off your body like butter horrified the teen.

The door opened, and Jashaun couldn't make out the tall, medium-built man slowly meandering his way through the room since the room was so pitch black. The only light in the room was the faint blue light pouring from the small TV screen feet away from his bed, hoisted in a corner wall. The man, whistling some throwback tune, like some the Temptations or Smokey Robinson, bumbled in and inched his way closer and closer to Jashaun's bed. He scanned the room up and down, left and right, inspecting the room's fire detectives, sprinklers and what not. Finally getting inches from the bed, Jashaun, sitting upright, covered in a light blue blanket, quickly made out the man's face…It was some old ass nigga, a tooth pick dangling from his long crusty purple lips. He looked like he was about a good sixty or seventy years old, had a shiny bald head with a grey cul-de-sac wrapping around the sides of his noggin. "Sorry 'bout that suh, I just need to check one mo thang if you don't mind…" The man got centimeters to the side of his bed and leaned down next to a nightstand.

“Sure,” Jashaun mumbled as he turned his attention right back to the commercials blaring from the TV screen. He just wanted this old ass nigga to hurry his Willacoochie, Georgia sounding ass up and leave his room and go eat his chitlin loaf.

“FUCK BOY! Where the fuck yo mama at?” Growled the “maintenance man," who quickly jumped on his heavy feet and lunged into the bed. With murder on his mind, the maintenance man gripped Jashaun’s neck, clasping his trachea , ensuring no oxygen could enter his lungs making sure death was seconds away. Then Jashaun’s would-be killer pulled out a small, glistening hunter’s knife and dug the tip into the boy’s neck, not slicing him up. Not just yet…

Jashaun tried screaming and shouting for help, doing his best to fight and resist the man’s grip of terror around his neck and body. But of course, Jashaun, being weak due to the paralysis that immobilized his left side, he couldn’t do anything other than quiver like a fish out the water, fighting to breathe. Fighting to have another chance at life.

The frightening man used his left hand to muzzle the scared boy’s mouth and temporarily pulled the knife off his neck, and while stilling holding the knife in his palms, he used the tips of his fingers to quickly peel off a mask from his face and threw it off to the side. Jashaun’s eyes widened in full terror. It was motherfuckin’ Tahmir, and Jashaun just knew this was it. This was his real death sentence. Fuck having brain damage. Fuck having AIDS. His young ass wasn’t gonna have an opportunity at redemption, he was going to die right now. Quickly trying to make his peace with God, accepting the fact that at any second now Tahmir was going to drive the neck into his frail, still recovery body and spill his blood, Jashaun closed his eyes and wailed.

“Nigga, I asked you a muhfuckin’ question! Where yo mama at?!?”

“I dd-dd-ddon’t know!” Jashaun stammered, elephant-sized tears forming in the ducts of his still amplified, fearsome brown eyes.

“Nigga, are you fuckin’ lyin to me?!? You wanna die, lil nigga? In fact, let’s just end this shit right now since you the one who landed my ass in jail,” Tahmir growled as he then flashed the knife, faint light from the TV bounced off the tip as he admired it’s sharp edge. Then he took the knife and without hesitation drove the tip of the knife into Jashaun's cheekbone, tearing his flesh, causing a small trail of blood to form .

“No-nonnn-no, I ppromise, I don’t know. Sh-sshshshhhe she had me raped by some unknown nigga and thth—thththen made it ss-sssss-seeem like you did it,” Jashaun stuttered.

“And who the fuck killed Khai? She did that shit too? Are you fuckin’ lyin’ to me boy?!?” Tahmir dug the knife deeper, and Jashaun cried, wailing in pain, feeling the tip of the knife almost touch his

cheek bone.

"Sh-sshsshe did! Shh-shhe got arrested!"

"What?!?"

"Yeah…And she got me AIDS!"

Hearing that, Tahmir instantly snapped the knife back. His eyes turned to slits. "You got HIV?!?"

"Yeah…Wh-whwhoo ever raped me gave me HIV!"

"The fuck?!??!" Tahmir's eyes widened.

"I hate her ass. I told her I don't want to see her again. She ruined my life. She ruined everyone's life. She fucked everything up. I got brain damage now 'cuz of her ass!" Jashaun continued crying as Tahmir slowly released his grip from the boy.

He just stood there, didn't say a fucking word, as he huffed and growled, plotting his next move….that's if Jashaun was telling him the truth. "You know, you lucky as fuck right now. Really lucky. If I didn't pity your dumb faggot ass, I'd slice yo ass up like a Honey Baked Ham. But you right, yo mama fucked you over. You. Tasia. Jasmine. Me. Everyone. Speakin' of which, where's Tasia?"

Jashaun shook his head no, "I dd-dd-on't know…"

"I can't find her nowhere. But I'm gonna find Darnisha, and if she comes back here, call this number and tell me," Jashaun whipped out a crumbled up piece of paper and threw it Jashaun. "If I find out you lyin' to me, just know, I'm comin' back, and next time, it's gonna be lights out for real for real. You understand me, nigga?"

Jashaun nodded his head yes.

"DO YOU UNDERSTAND ME NIGGA?!?" Tahmir suddenly brandished the knife again and wedged it against Jashaun's chest, ready to carve out his heart and feed it to him.

"Y-yyyes…" Jashaun cried in his fearful mutter.

"Good then…Stay yo ass off the streets. Get your shit together and have a nice life. Oh, and if you tell anyone you saw me, I'm comin' back and takin that ass…." Tahmir put the knife back into his pocket, and then thought about he said and smiled… "No pun intended…I don't want that ass." Then he quickly made his way out the room and disappeared off into the quiet night like the phantom he was.

Jashaun waited about minute or two until he felt safe enough to try to make his way out of the bed and to the bathroom. Once he managed to squish himself out the bed, he turned on the light on the nightstand and looked at the bed. He shitted and pissed all over himself, and now he was gonna have to call a nurse or a nurse's assistant to come help him clean up his shitty pissy ass. As the smell of fresh, hot, and soft diarrhea-like shit mixed with warm piss invaded his nostrils, a flood of tears rushed down his face and to his hospital gown.

Once he made his way into the bathroom, he flicked on the light and closely examined the fresh cut infused into his face. Tahmir's hunter's blade gashed a deep cut right into Jashaun's upper cheek so deep, you could see a part of his white cheek bone and light pink flesh. He grabbed a few napkins, minimizing the bleeding. He just continued to stare into the mirror, crying, thankful but still fearful that Tahmir showed him grace.

Chapter Thirty-Eight

A day later…

Cook County Criminal Court, as usual, was packed to the fucking brim like it was a Lil Uzi Vert concert or some shit. All types of wayward, rugged criminal looking ass people, mainly black and brown, were idly sitting, thick handcuffs slapped to their wrists. So much neon orange bounced off the jail uniforms of these motherfuckers, the court wouldn't need any lighting to illuminate the densely packed room truth be told. Everyone was unenthusiastically ready to hear if the judge was gonna grant them the opportunity to walk free, at least for the time being. Crazy though – most of these muhfuckas probably couldn't afford to bond out anyways, so it was almost as if they were wasting their time listening to the judge give them an opportunity to get some sunshine outside the confinements of the jail.

"The State, are you ready to proceed?" The old gray haired Judge Steven DeLuca was presiding over bond hearings today at Cook County Criminal Court. He had a rep for being a very nonchalant, laid back judge who just simply showed up to work, did what he had to do to collect his paycheck and then would deuce the fuck out like he had some good pussy waiting for him back at the crib.

"Yes, your honor…" A young black female prosecutor off to the side at a podium mean mugged Darnisha as she got up from her seat and limped the podium at the defense table. Darnisha knew she was next on the docket.

The scamming scandalous bitch's yellow body tore the fuck up. Got her ass viciously beat like a stepchild that stole a piece of peppermint candy. Although she scantly remembered what happened that day, all she knew was that Ryann's ex-girlfriend from way back when, this crazy butch hoe named Sha, and a few of the girls inside the cell jumped her ass until she blacked out. Luckily for her, although she only got a broken nose, a broken jaw, bruising up and down her thighs, and had some swelling on her head, those crazy dikes didn't murder her. Thank God within minutes jail guards intervened and broke up the fight, because had they not, Sha and her gang would've been successful at sending Darnisha six feet under.

Although Ryann barely made mention of her, Darnisha knew of Sha just by the stories Ryann used to tell her. She never saw the bitch once, but based on the shit Ryann would recollect, she knew that hoe was a fucking monster. The more Darnisha thought about, the more she realized that Sha was probably stalking Ryann and Darnisha, and

that was probably why she'd recognized her inside the jail cell that night. After the fight, Darnisha spent a day in the jail hospital and then was immediately put in protective custody until her bond hearing.

"Defense, are you ready to proceed as well?" The judge asked Darnisha's attorney, actually hired by Tre to help her post bond. "Yes, your honor," Mr. Kublinsky, some fat greasy Jewish slimeball muhfucka with a Donald Trump toupee who was known for working for drug dealers confirmed to the judge he was ready to proceed with the hearing.

"In the matter of State of Illinois vs. Darnisha Johnson – Case number 251012 – Today, as you may understand is not your actual arraignment. This is simple a procedural bond hearing to determine if you should walk free. You're charged with several counts of attempting to defraud a financial institution. This is a very serious charge, and carries a maximum sentence of thirty years in prison. The State, please present your case against the defendant being able to post bond…"

Darnisha quickly looked back and saw Tre staring her down with the most spiteful stare she'd even seen on his dark brown, well-chiseled face. With his arms folded, he just sat there far off, his foot tapping rapidly against the ground, anxious as fuck to get Darnisha's crazy manipulative ass out this jam.

"Yes your honor, the State requests to set Ms. Johnson's bail at $1 million. Given the gravity of her crimes, we feel as though she presents a clear danger to society by engaging in almost a decade of wide-scale bank fraud. We cannot risk having her easily get out and defraud our nation's biggest banks."

"Ok…Defense, do you have a challenge?" The judge then turned his attention to Darnisha's attorney. He stood up from his seat, fumbled through some paperwork and smiled. "No your honor, my client is content with the bail set by the State."

The prosecutor, who'd didn't see that coming dropped her mouth in surprise. Guess she never thought a hood nigga bitch like Darnisha had access to those types of funds. "We'll be posting the bail shortly…"

"Welp, Ms. Johnson, you're a free woman for a now…" the Judge smiled, and then rummaged through paperwork on his desk, "Next case…The State versus Quartayvious Miller…"

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"Hrrrrm…Don't get too comfortable," A black female corrections officer uncuffed Darnisha and escorted her into the lobby of the

detention center. Once she made it past through the metal detectors, she dashed towards Tre, ready to give him a big ass hug. This bitch was acting like she'd just walked off a plane after serving a tour in Iraq. However, he seemed unenthused by her presence. A bit bothered actually. He just stood there, not wanting to hug her back, and quickly looked her up and down, "So how you feelin'?"

"Damn, no hug?" Darnisha asked sounding a bit down, her brow raised in confusion.

"No, we gotta get the fuck up out of here like. ASAP! Let's go. Come on, walk, and walk fast."

"Ok, I gues…" Darnisha rolled her eyes and followed behind Tre who was moving a hundred miles per hour through the busy lobby of the temporary detention center that wasn't too far away from the courthouse.

Once the pair made it outside and out to the detention center's parking lot, Tre quickly opened the car door, let Darnisha in and then ran to the driver's side, hopped in, chucked up the engine and sped off like a bat out of fucking hell. Darnisha sensed something was up with bae, yet Tre wasn't ready yet to spill the deets just yet. He just wanted to get back to his condo ASAP so he could make some serious ass, life or death moves.

Five minutes into the drive, Darnisha opened her mouth, needing to break the awkward silence between the two. "Damn, why you actin' all paranoid and shit??!? And watchu mean about Tahmir?!? You ain't hear the news! He's dead. I just don't understand why you worried about him?! I got other shi—"

"He's NOT dead. That nigga escaped from the county! And we gotta get the fuck up out of Chicago 'cuz now his half-brother, Gemini, is back here with Tasia," Tre quickly interrupted Darnisha, his words slapping her with surprise and confusion.

"What the fuck you mean he not dead?!? He died in a fire, Tre! That's what the prosecutor told me! Nigga, it was all over the muhfuckin' news!" Darnisha scrunched her face up and looked at Tre with disgust and astonishment. Didn't he hear about the fire, she wondered. Then all of a sudden, she remembered he'd just come back from his "business trip" and maybe no one hit him up to relay the good news.

"Bitch, I know that! Shit was all planned out. Some of my niggas told me he had someone on the inside help him blow up the floor he was on. They planted a fake body in his cell and made it seem like it was him. But he's out, probably looking for you and maybe even my ass. I knew I should've never got caught the fuck up with you and fucking Ryann. Fucking scummy bitches! FUCK!" Tre shook his head, looking disgusted. He was right though. He was doing perfectly fine

until he got involved with Ryann and Darnisha. All along his intuition was telling him to leave those trifling, non-intelligent guttersnipes alone, but since him and his dick had an addiction to thick, redbone bitches like Darnisha, he unfortunately got caught the fuck up.

"What!? Dat don't even make no sense?!?!? And you talkin' about that lame ass Gemini?!? His wack ass wasn't even 'bout that life! He moved down to Texas years ago with his bald-headed ass mammy!" Darnisha threw her hands up and this bitch wasn't showing Tre any respect, especially given he'd just dropped the equivalent of a fucking 401k to get her ass out of jail. She continued, "Yo dude, what the fuck are you even talkin' about?!? Have you been smokin' crack or some shit?!? And how would Gemini even have Tasia?!? You sound so fuckin' stupid and paranoid right now. And fuck you and fuck ya bitch ass mama for that slick ass comment. You wasn't callin' me scummy and shit when you was stickin' yo dick all up in my pussy. Had yo dry ass tongue so far up my ass like you was lookin' for a scratch off ticket!"

Going damn near a hundred miles per hour, in and out of traffic on the expressway, Tre slowed down and got into the right lane. Then once traffic was clear on the car's right side, he suddenly pulled over into the emergency shoulder and threw the car in park, "'Scuse me?" Tre looked around, squinted his eyes, scratched his head and made this Ike Turner snort from his nose. Then without hesitation he slammed his thick, colossal fist into Darnisha's stomach, "WHO THE FUCK ARE YOU TALKIN' TO LIKE THAT BITCH?!? ARE YOU OUT OF YO MOTHAFUCKIN' MIND?" Darnisha, still in pain from getting her ass whooped in jail, screamed and jerked forward, grabbing her stomach. She felt like she'd just got hit by a car. The wind was knocked the fuck out of her lungs and all she saw were stars around her head. Tre hit her so damn hard in her abdomen, she could immediately feel the pain travel up into her chest and even down into her uterus.

Tre reached in and quickly grabbed Darnisha by her neck, snatching her down into his lap in one swift motion. "WHO THE FUCK YOU TALKIN' TO BITCH? YOU THINK I'M ONE OF THOSE DUMB LOW LIFE DOPE BOY NIGGAS YOU USED TO MESS WITH IN THE HOOD? HUH, BITCH!?!? Tre slammed his fist into her stomach again and punched her on the side of her head. "Answer me!"

He looked around again, reached into the back seat of his car, pulled out his gun resting on the floor , and then jammed it into Darnisha's mouth. "OPEN YO MOUTH BITCH! I SAID OPEN IT!" He growled, shoving the barrel of the gun deep down her throat. Darnisha had no other choice but to suck on the gun as her tonsils danced up and down the Glock's shaft. A tear escaped out of her eye as she

sobbed in pain, crying, totally unexpecting Tre to flip the script on her ass.

“You gon sit up there and fuckin’ disrespect me after I posted bond for your dumb illiterate manipulative ass! You feel that steel in the back of yo throat bitch!?!? I’ll put this gun so deep down in yo bad breath, dick suckin, lyin ass mouth and I’ll pull the trigger, and splatter what little brains you got sittin’ up in yo head all over my car’s interior.”

Darnisha quivered, feeling the gun go deeper down her throat, damn near choking and suffocating, tasting the bitter hard steel massage her tonsils.

“Now when we get back to the spot, you gon pack your clothes in a bag in fifteen minutes and be ready to get the fuck out of Chicago. DO YOU UNDERSTAND ME BITCH?!?”

“Ye-yyyesss.” Darnisha stuttered as her salty tears fell down to the sides of her pale face and onto to Tre’s lap.

“Now get the fuck up, keep your fuckin’ mouth shut unless I ask you a fuckin’ question, ‘cuz next time I won’t go as easy. Got it, hoe?”

“Yesss,” Darnisha stammered once more as she stared out the front window at nothing in particular. Her watery, hazy, reddened eyes still saw stars mixed in with the heavy traffic on the expressway. She folded her arms, and sat in the front passenger seat silent. She now knew in this very tumultuous moment the Boss Bitch Come Up plan had officially ended.

Chapter Thirty-Nine

"That's that fuck nigga right there…" TeKashi, one of the young goon hittas in the West Side Brick Squad Mafia, growled from the back seat of an all-Black Ford Expedition. The windows were tinted so damn black, it made the already pitch black night sky's cloudy expanse look blue. TeKashi's young, beady, murderous eyes attached to Cato walking down the street with his arm wrapped around some hoe, chopping it up like he was minutes away from getting some coochie. "I've been meanin' to get at this fuck boy for a while now. Heard he gave my cousin some shit," TeKashi groaned.

Gemini, seated at the front of the truck, had his eyes attached to the young teen as well. The same young nigga who had Tasia's friend, Marcia, set up and murdered by Murda Munna Gang some weeks backs. The streets as usual were talking, and it was only a matter of time before Brick Squad Mafia got word of who was behind different hits taking place in the city. The Brick Squad Mafia, which was a faction of Gemini and Tahmir's old wrecking crew and organization, just thought some young niggas were gunning for Cato, but now that Gemini was back in Chicago, and was able to put two and two together, the Brick Squad click soon discovered that it was all set up. Cato was a decoy used to kill the young girl who knew too much – too much about their top hitta, Tre, better known as Detective Speights.

Tonight, the first move for Gemini was to get all the low-level guys involved in Marcia's murder. In his mind, that was a completely fucked up thing to do. Kill a random ass girl over some shit that ain't had not a damn fucking thing to do with the streets. Earlier, Gemini did some snoopin' around and soon discovered that Cato was there all along with Marcia. Now this nigga was gonna have to pay the price of death, but before Gemini handed down his death sentence, he needed to get the exact whereabouts of this nigga Tre. Gemini, who knew how the streets worked, was certain these young clown ass punk ass niggas weren't calling no real shots. Someone put them up to this – someone close to Tre, and he was gonna find out tonight.

"Stay put, youngin…When I knock his ass out and scare the young bitch off, be ready to pull up, pop the trunk and we can throw this

fuck nigga in the back," Gemini instructed to TeKashi along with the driver of the truck. "Bet," Tekashi rubbed his hands as his eyes turned to slits. This nigga TeKashi was ready to kill. And he wanted to do something more than just light a nigga up with a blicky. He had another plan in mind, and with Gemini's permission, tonight was gonna be like getting an all-day access pass to Disney World, Universal Studios and Busch Gardens.

Gemini got out the truck and slowly made his way behind the couple walking down the street in the quiet, dark South Side neighborhood. Feet behind Cato, Gemini quickly switched up his act, pretending be lost and scared, "Aye yo, my brother…" Cato suddenly turned around, along with some young THOT with a bad purple weave in her head. With his arm still wrapped around her neck and shoulders, Cato looked Gemini up and down and gave him this scowl like he stepped to the wrong one.

"Nigga, da fuck you want, can't you see I'm with my bitch?!? Get the fuck out my face, hoe ass nigga…" Then the young, disrespectful, ignorant ass nigga, unaware of his fate about to befall him, spun around and kept walking.

"We gotta talk, Cato. It's about your mother…" Gemini knew not only would Cato be caught by surprise hearing some random, unknown nigga drop his name, but also mentioning his mother was the ultimate trigger word. No nigga, especially a Chicago street nigga, wanted anyone mentioning their mother in any shape, form of fashion. Gemini truth be told was just talkin' out of his ass, not really having a rhyme or reason to what he was saying. But this was deliberate. Sometimes less is more – and just by looking and playing the part of a corny, unassuming muhfucka, Gemini knew a dumb street nigga like Cato was bound to react and try to up the blicky on him just for clout.

Cato stopped dead in his tracks. His eyes enlarged with fury. He spun on his feet and lunged towards Gemini, looking him up and down, "Nigga, how the fuck you know my name? Who the fuck you is? And what da fuck you said about my mama, bitch nigga?" By this point, Gemini should've won a Daytime Emmy for this awesome ass performance since he suddenly looked even more scared. "Nah, bro, it's not even like that. I was just tryin to he—"

Suddenly without hesitation Cato's reckless ass pulled out a silver Glock sloppily tucked in the back of his jeans, "NIGGA SAY SUM'IN ELSE OR I'LL BLOW YO HEAD SMOO—"

Snap! Pow! Snap! Gemini abruptly did away with the fearful, perplexing act and switched into ex-marine mode. Using his 9th degree jiu jitsu black belt, he rapidly grabbed the gun out of Cato's hand, and then grabbed his arm, twisted it up in the air and then came down

with the most violent, sheer force; snapping his arm in half at the elbow joint.

"AHH! AHHHHHH!" Cato screamed as he collapsed to the sidewalk, reeling in the most intense pain he'd ever experienced in his entire young nigga existence. The young THOT bitch, who looked like she had some fishy coochie and a scarred-up uterus from having ten abortions, took off running, screaming her lungs off. Although this wasn't part of the plan, unfortunately for the young dumb bitch, Gemini then took Cato's Glock and let shots off, hitting the girl in her back.

POW! POW! POW! POW!

The girl instantly fell to the ground, instantly dying. Her body now laying motionless in a growing pool of her lava-like blood. Cato was crying his heart out like a little toddler that fell off his bike. But not because the young bitch he was about to fuck just got murked before his very own shady ass eyes. This nigga actually didn't give two shits about her ass. He was crying because every time he attempted to move his arm slightly, the most unbearable pain shot up his spine and to his head, making him feel like he was about to black the fuck out at any time.

The black Expedition rushed to Gemini's side. TeKashi opened up the door and hopped out. "Yeah, fuck nigga, didn't see that shit comin', huh?" The driver of the truck, this big goon ass nigga named Fat Trel, hopped out, popped the trunk open, and all three guys picked up Cato's limber body and threw him in the back as if he was just a bag of sand or cement. Cato tried to resist a bit, but before he could get a hit, Fat Trel in one punch knocked buddy to sleep. TeKashi pulled out a pair of handcuffs and shackled Cato's wrists. This shit was gonna hurt big time to Cato because now his arms were behind his back, and once he woke up from being knocked the fuck out by Trel, his shit was gonna feel like he got ran over by a Mack truck. All three guys then hopped back in the truck and sped off.

Minutes later, Gemini, who was now sitting in the back, got up and leaned behind his seat and began slapping Cato in the face with the gun, "Wake the fuck up, nigga! WAKE UP!"

Cato opened his eyes, staring at the barrel of the gun nested in between his eyes. "AHH! AHHH! SHIT! Mmmaaan, I'm in pain. Please man! What I do?!?" Cato cried, beads of sweat and tears rolling down his face like an avalanche in Swiss Alps.

"You set Marcia up. Who pulled the trigger?" Gemini spat, the gun pointed at Cato.

"Man, I don't know what you talkin' 'bout!" Cato cried as he attempted to inch away from the menacing Gemini, but before he could make it far, Gemini pointed the gun to his foot. *POW!*

"AHHH! AHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHH!!!!"

"You gon tell me now? Who the fuck pulled the trigger? Next time, I'm landing one in your head."

With foam forming at the corners of his mouth, obviously still reeling in such intense pain, Cato knew not to open his fuckin' mouth. He slowly shook his head no. In this bittersweet moment, young nigga kind of had heart. He knew the street code. NO SNITCHIN'! But then once he heard the click coming from the gun, he quickly realized Gemini was going to end his life in one pull of the trigger.

"3..2…" Gemini counted down, ready to kill Cato.

"OK! NO! NO! It was Lil Keemo! He pulled the trigger. I ain't have shit to do with this! They just told me to set the mixed bitch up!"

Gemini pointed the gun at Cato's other foot. *POW!*

"AHH! AHHHHHHHHHHHHH!"

"That mixed bitch was a good, innocent girl with a promising future. And you fuck niggas snuffed her out over some dumb shit. Where the fuck does Keemo live?"

"Rr-Rrroseland…Roseland!"

"GIVE ME AN ADDRESS NIGGA BEFORE I BLOW YOOUR ARM OFF!"

"Come on bro! He stay off 115th and Halsted! In an apartment building with his grandmama'nem."

"Trel, you heard that?" Gemini barked, turning his attention to the astute Brick Squad soldier.

"Got it – I'm on it boss!"

"Who put Keemo up to this. Ya'll ain't did that shit just to be doing it. Who gave ya'll the order?" Gemini asked once more.

"It…It was Poot…"

"You know where Poot lives?"

"Nah…But Keemo does though. That's his big bro."

Gemini turned around back in his seat and smiled. This shit was just too easy.

~

"This what we gon do…You gon call that nigga and tell him you copped a brick from the plug for the low." Gemini instructed, a block away from Lil Keemo's apartment.

"Ok, bro…" Cato muttered from the truck's trunk.

Gemini searched Cato's pockets, and then pulled out his iPhone. "What's the fuckin' password, clown ass nigga?"

"2498…" Cato muttered.

Seconds later, Gemini pulled up Lil Keemo's number and dialed it, turning on the speakerphone. He held the phone up to Cato's mouth.

The phone rang, and rang, rang… “Waddup, gang? Shit what the fuck you on?!? It’s late as hell, G!” Lil Keemo barked.

“Aye fool, meet me outside in five. I copped a brick from Pablo’nem on the low.”

“Da fuck?!? Poot’nem know?”

“N-nnah, not really.”

“Waddup wit shorty though? Where she at?!?”

“Back at her mama crib. But look fammo, just meet me outside in five…I’m wit broski’nem too…”

“Who?”

“Pac and a few other guys.”

“Bet…Aiight I’ll be out in a few…”

Gemini ended the call. “You ready TeKashi?”

“Nigga, been ready…” TeKashi pulled up a sawed off 12-gauge shotgun, blew into the barrel and wiped it down with the tall black tee he was wearing. Thank God Chicago winters lately had been warm. Tonight was in the 50s. Windy and somewhat chilly, but warm enough for the young hitta to dress super-comfortable.

“Good…” Gemini growled.

Gemini and his Brick Squad Mafia pulled up to small beige apartment building right off Halsted street in Roseland. Gemini looked around, quickly examining his surroundings. Abandoned buildings, vacant lots and a closed liquor store occupied the desolate South Side street. The Brick Squad crew sat idle for a good three minutes. Gemini then whipped out Cato’s phone and dialed Keemo again. He held the phone up to Cato’s face… “Waddup…” Keemo answered. “I’m outside, nigga. In a black Expedition…” Cato responded, looking at Gemini. “Bet.” Keemo then hung up the phone.

A minute or two later, the young hitta slowly stumbled out of the front door of the apartment building, rubbing his hands together, cautiously looking around the block. Typical street nigga paranoia. Always on the lookout for the opps. Except his ass was walking right into the opps now. Unaware like a motherfucka. Oh well. That was unfortune street life came with. Your number could be called at any fucking time.

With Keemo getting closer and closer to the truck, Tekashi slowly let the front passenger seat window’s down, swiftly slid the gun out, and aimed right at Lil Keemo’s chest.

Lil Keemo’s eyes registered the huge double barrel, “OH SHIT!” he growled, quickly turning on his feet and tried to run to escape the looming blast from the shotgun. But before he could find cover, Tekashi pulled the trigger.

POW! A massive blast hit Lil Keemo in his back, sending him to the concrete.

Gemini and TeKashi plopped out the truck, rushed to Lil Keemo as he lay on the front entrance's sidewalk, slowly crawling his way to safety. "Rat shots…You'll be aiight, youngin'… That's if you tell me where the fuck Poot lives…"

"Maaaan, fuck you. I ain't tellin you shit!" Lil Keemo replied as he kept trying to move closer to the apartment's entrance. Pretty crazy how he was so oblivious to the fact that these guys were seconds away from killing him if he didn't give up info. "Fuckin' Cato set me the fuck up…Fuck ass nigga. I always knew he was a snake."

"You got it…But enough about snakes, nigga. Where is that nigga Poot at? We can do this the easy way or the hard way…" Gemini pulled out his Glock and aimed it at Lil Keemo's head.

"Man, fuck yo—"

POW! POW! Gemini landed two bullets in the young boy's back, instantly killing him. "Take his head off. No open casket funeral for this wanna be loyal, dumb ass clown." Gemini gave TeKashi the permission to turn Lil Keemo's head into bloody brown putty.

TeKashi aimed the barrel of the shotgun at Lil Keemo's dread covered head.

"Hoe ass nigga!" POW! Brain and blood splattered all over the place, even onto TeKashi's face, which crazy as it may sound, he didn't mind. He actually loved and relished the taste of the opps blood sometimes sprinkling into his mouth. Half of Lil Keemo's head was blown off, and now, not even the best funeral home make up artist in the world could reconstruct this nigga's head to give grieving family members one last look at their lost loved one.

Gemini looked around for a second and then saw a light come on from the second floor's apartment window facing the street. The silhouette of an older woman appeared, and Gemini instantly knew that was probably Lil Keemo's old lady. "Grab his keys, wallet, phone and pistol. We gon talk to his folks…" Gemini commanded TeKashi. Then the two hittas stormed the apartment's front entrance, quickly opened the door with the keys and made their way upstairs to the second floor. The apartment building wasn't that small – there were probably no more than ten units in the entire building. Gemini quickly figured out which one Lil Keemo and his grandma stayed in. Then without hesitation, Gemini transferred all 225 pounds of his bodyweight into his foot and kicked the front door down like it was made out of straw. Wood shattered and flew all over the place.

Once inside, the two killers stormed the bedroom down the hallway. A heavier set woman with a black satin bonnet wrapped around head, probably in her late 50s or early 60s, quickly sat up in the bed, grabbing her sheets to cover herself, looking like she'd just seen Harriet Tubman's ghost.

“Where the fuck does Poot live?” Gemini asked with the Glock pointed at her.

“I-I—I-I I DON’T KNOW!” Keemo’s old lady yelled and cried.

“You believe her?” Gemini asked TeKashi. “No,” he responded. Gemini then lunged at the bed, grabbed a pillow and smothered the woman. POW! He shot near the side of the pillow.

“AHH! AHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHH!” The woman cried and screamed.

Gemini snatched the pillow off her face, “I’m gonna ask you one more time, and then I’m killing you for real, you understand me, bitch?”

“YE-YEEES! He lives in the South Loop. 2020 South Dearborn in the tall blue towers. Apartment 3400!”

“Thanks!” Gemini smiled, and the two quickly exited the apartment building, ready to go find the second in command. But before they get to him, it was time to get rid of Cato.

Chapter Forty

"Fuck! FUCK! FUCK! I'm cumming!" Shatoya came, splashing her pussy juice all over her nigga Quartayvious' lap as she rode his long dick in new king-sized bed. She was still going at it though – jumping up and down on that nigga's dick, trying to get her seventh nut for the night. With her long, brown titties flopping in the air, she was going at it, trying to relieve her mind of all the stress she'd went through over the last few days.

Unbeknownst to Darnisha, her so-called ride or die BFF and occasionally pussy munchin' buddy, was working with the Chicago Police Department as an informant to help bust credit card and bank fraud scammers in the city. Shatoya was the first to get caught the fuck up; arrested some months back by the police. But rather than send her ass straight to the pen, the police knew she'd be the perfect bait to get the rest of the scammer crew caught the fuck up.

In return for being a paid snitch, yup that's right, PAID snitch, the police department offered Shatoya immunity from charges so long as she didn't revert back to her criminal wayward ways. She agreed. She had too much to lose. Unlike Darnisha, Shatoya was somewhat of a better mother and also had to care for her elderly mother who was slowly dying from lupus.

Now that Darnisha was in jail, or at least she assumed she was still in jail, she didn't get the news yet that her "BFF" had posted bail, Shatoya was enjoying her new sense of freedom by getting some good ole dick. As she kept letting her nigga's pole swivel in and out of her tight pussy, the bliss took her far away from the projects and to the seventh level of heaven. Her eyes closed, all she could think about was seeing if she could set a record of getting ten nuts in one night.

12:15 AM right on the dot. As Quartayvious' dick kept pounding lil mama's pussy, Shatoya's bedroom door creaked open in silence…A pair of eyes zoomed in on the two wrapped up in their lustful ecstasy. Those same pair of eyes then transformed into homicidal slits, and the person who those same eyes belonged to moved into the room like cool, invisible air…. It was Tahmir, wearing an all-white disposable protective coverall. You know some shit a painter or exterminator

would wear.

As he roamed closer to the bed, his thick shadow cast over the two fuck rabbits still going at. Quartayvious' eyes sensed the lethal darkness, and opened, immediately attaching to Tahmir's presence as he hovered over them. In his hand was the sharpest machete, some shit that African niggas used to chop down sugar cane shoots in Zimbabwe or some shit.

"OH FUCK! SHIT FUCK!!" Quartayvious threw Shatoya off him and tried to dash out the bed, but before he could escape the room, Tahmir lunged towards him and in one swift swipe, Tahmir decapitated him and his head flew across the room. His body fell to the ground, and his neck gushed out blood like a broken fire hydrant.

"AHH! AHHHHHHH! AHHHHHH!" Shatoya screamed as she huddled up in a corner, still naked, doing her best to cover up her soppy creamy coochie and big brown titties. "PLEASE! NO! TAHMIR! DON'T KILL ME, PLEASE! She beseeched and begged, bewildered, because she'd never thought in a million years this would even happen. Shit, just like everyone else she thought Tahmir was dead, so seeing him before her very own eyes was beyond unbelievable.

He slowly moved closer and closer to her, "Where is Darnisha?"

"She in jail! She got arrested!"

"She's not there no more. You're lying to me!" Tahmir cocked back his hand holding the blade, ready to hack the scared ghetto THOT bitch former fraudster turned snitch to death.

"NOO! PLEASE NO!! I DON'T KNOW!" Shatoya continued to cry out and wail with her eyes closed.

"Bitch, stop fuckin' playin games with me before I slice yo ass up like Kobe beef!" Tahmir stooped down and pointed the tip of the blade in between her titties that still glistened with sex sweat and coconut oil. Quartayvious earlier that night gave her ass a deep, sensual massage before tearing the pussy up.

"I swear Tahmir! I'ono shit! Please! Just please don't hurt me or my kids! I swear we ain't got shit to do what she did to you!"

"They dead already, so you don't need to worry about them. You just need to worry about yourself, that's if yo dumb ass still wanna live. So I'm gon ask you one more time or I'm gonna turn yo ass into kung pao chicken. WHERE THE FUCK IS DARNISHA?!?"

"I SAID I DON'T KN—"

SLICE! SLICE! SLICE! Tahmir whooshed and zipped the long machete's blade across her face, neck and torso. Shatoya grabbed her throat, choking, blood gushing out of her neck, splashing all over Tahmir's coverall. "Stupid ass hoe. You had some rotten pussy anyways…" Tahmir then hacked away at her body, easily and quickly tearing away at her flesh, breaking through her bones. Once he got

done turning her into prime cuts of human meat, he quickly took of the coverall, went to her bathroom and washed his hands and face, making sure he had no signs of blood over him. This nigga was now on a vengeful rampage, and he was going to find and kill Darnisha, and anyone else who could possibly know where her trifling nigga ass was. As Tahmir made his way through the living room, he glanced over at Shatoya's three kids who were tied up and their mouths muzzled with tape. Their innocent eyes looked at him in confusion and fear, wondering what he did to their mother. "Sorry, but she was a horrible mama to ya'll anyways…"

One of the teenagers, a girl, lowered her head and cried. The two others just sat there on the ground in the dark living room, panting. Tahmir shook his head, a bit remorseful he had to kill their only parent, but he quickly stamped out all regret and kept that shit moving. No time for repentance. Sometimes there were gonna be innocent bystanders caught the fuck up. Once Tahmir made his way outside, he sprinted off into the dark and disappeared. He had no idea how he was going to get to Darnisha, but he was going to eventually get to her conniving, manipulative ass. Her day was coming.

Chapter Forty-One

1:05 AM…Speeding down the vastly empty Georgia expressway, Tre and Darnisha escaped out of Chicago, making their way as fast as they could to Atlanta. About a good hour away from entering the city, Tre had already made reservations at a Holiday Inn in Stone Mountain. The plan, according to Tre, was to spend a few days in Atlanta, and then hit the road again and make their way to Miami. Once they got down there, Tre, who already had fake identities and passports for both he and Darnisha, were going to hop on a plane and go straight to Jamaica and stay there indefinitely until Tre got word that shit was cooling out in the Chi.

R. Kelly's "Ignition" lowly blared from the radio as his eyes concentrated on the slightly foggy road. Darnisha, arms folded, had her head tilted against the passenger window, sleep.

Ring. Ring. Ring. Poot's number flashed across his radio console.

"Waddup bro, where you at?" Poot said once Tre answered the phone from his car's Bluetooth system. Hearing Poot's deep, raspy South Side voice instantly awakened Darnisha from her sleep.

"We 'bout a good fifty minutes north of the city."

"Cool…" Poot responded. "Still ain't no word on where that nigga Tahmir at. Also, no one seen Gemini. If Gemini really back in the city, those Brick Squad Mafia niggas doin' a good job of keepin' his cover. But shit, the way you makin' it seem like, I'm just shocked they ain't made a move yet."

"Yeah, that shit is strange. That's those niggas MO though. They move in silence. We fucked up bro. We fucked up. My nigga you need to dip too until shit clears. Ain't no tellin' what those niggas know." Tre responded with slight fear laced in his tone.

"Man, fuck all that. I'm a fuckin' G. If those niggas want war, I'mma bring it." Poot exclaimed. Was this nigga really serious, Tre though. However, he was serious. Before dipping out, Poot told him earlier he thought it wasn't that much of a big deal. He told him he probably was overreacting, and that Tahmir's bitch ass probably took off to somewhere like Cali or Canada to get far away from Chicago. His reasoning actually made sense though. After blowing up the

county jail where you were being detained for rape and murder charges, the last thing you'd logically would want to do is linger around in the city like you just didn't do some Osama Bin Laden-type shit. If you were willing to go through all of that, getting caught or killed by former street rivals was the last thing on your fucking agenda.

"Poot man, bro. Those niggas are dangerous. You must've forgot what life was like when King T controlled the streets. Get the fuck out of there broski, like fa real."

"Yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah I hear you bro. But it is what it is nigga. I'll probably dip out and go to my peoples' crib out in St. Louis. I just got some shit to take care of right now." Tre heard a faint chuckle from some bitch in the background. Typical. "For real, bro. Get the fuck out! Tell all the niggas to lay low." Tre warned. He then asked, "Have you heard from Cato, Keemo or Pac?"

"Nah, I ain't heard from the youngins', I'll hit'em later. But anyways bro, stop being so paranoid and shit. King T and Gemini, yeah them niggas used to run shit back in the day, but they ain't got it like that no more. Yeah, they might still got a couple of soldiers and shit workin' for them, but those niggas ain't wit the shits like that. But umm, just be safe my nigga and hit me up in the morn."

"Aiight nigga, hit me up tomorrow," Tre rolled his eyes at hearing Poot's lackadaisical attitude.

Once the call ended, the car's radio amped back up. Darnisha looked at Tre, and then he quickly turned his head and looked at her. She didn't smile or put a weird scowl on her face. Being as neutral as possible, she didn't want to further piss of the nigga who was high off a heavy dose of paranoia. Looking angrier than a muhfuckin' hungry ass pitbull, Tre shook his head and turned the radio up. Migos' "Slippery" poured from the speakers.

"How far are we away?" Darnisha carefully asked, not giving Tre any eye contact.

"Got another 45. Just go back to sleep and I'll tell you when we get there."

"Ok…" Following Tre's command, she closed her eyes and nodded back off to sleep.

~

4:30 AM. Tre and Darnisha arrived at the hotel hours earlier. Because Tre and Darnisha now needed to go fully absorb their new identities – they both needed to change up their looks. Tre shaved his head and beard, only leaving a mustache to adorn his face. Tre forced Darnisha to cut her hair as short as possible and dye it devil red. Nigga had this

already thought out, even bought the hair dye and pair of scissors so she could get to work with giving herself the new hairdo as soon as they got inside their hotel room. After she'd spent over an hour or so, doing her best to make her new hairdo look as fashionable as possible, she emerged from the bathroom with nothing on but a towel wrapped around her slender body, still somewhat in pain from the hits Tre gave her earlier.

Tre, lying in the bed with nothing on but some black briefs, was taken aback by her new look – but not in a bad way. She looked completely different. She actually reminded him of Rihanna when she'd cut her hair and dyed it red.

Tre beamed, "Damn, you sexy as shit…"

Darnisha nervously smiled back, "Thanks…"

Tre sensed Darnisha, rather "Belinda, her new name, was still bothered by everything. Who wouldn't be though? She found herself now doing some serious ass low life criminal shit. All this because her ass had a delusional pipe dream to use any means necessary to get out of the projects and live a life of fast riches and luxury. She set up and framed a man who was supposed to be her boyfriend. Had her son raped. Murdered her own infant son. Sold off her niece as a sex slave. The list could go on. And now that she was escaping Chicago knowing she was out on bond, it was just a matter of time before a warrant was going to be out for her and she was going to be facing the rest of her life behind prison bars.

"I see you still mad at me…" Tre grumbled

Darnisha didn't respond, she just kept rummaging through her suitcase sitting on top of the dresser, looking for a pair of underwear and a bra.

Tre then hopped out the bed and sauntered towards her. The moment his hands touched her shoulders, she jerked and quivered. Tre realized she was still very much nervous and terrified of him and what he'd done to her earlier. "Damn, baby, I'm sorry, I didn't mean to react the way that I did. It's just…I was trying to look out for us. I mean, don't you understand shit is getting real right now?"

Darnisha turned around, her eyes swelling up with tears, "Tre, this isn't what I wanted or expected. I just don't think I can be on the run like this. It's too stressful. It's too much to think about," she wailed. "I'm just better off in prison. Fuck my life. Dis tew much…"

Tre huffed and rolled his eyes at her sobbing statement. "Darnisha, just calm down. I got you. You gotta believe me. We gon make this shit work. You just need to do as I say and you're gonna be good."

"How do I know that for sure? This shit is just gettin' too crazy Tre?" Darnisha cried, still holding her hands, tears falling down her rosy cheeks.

Tre clutched her by her wide hips, roughly pulling her frame into his. A nervous expression came across her face. Did she piss him off?

"Stop the bullshit. I got you. You think I'm just gonna let your ass just get sent the fuck off like that?"

Darnisha, gazing down, releasing tears, pulled her bottom lip into her mouth, biting the corner of it.

"N-nn-no," she stammered in a soft, nervous whisper.

"You know I love you right? You know the second we get to Jamaica, I'm gonna marry you," Tre sounded assuring, and the second he said that, her eyes widened in excitement. Tre put his index finger underneath her chin, lifting it so she was staring him right into his eyes. "Will you marry me?"

Darnisha grabbed her mouth, her eyes squinted, and more tears, but tears of joy ran down her face in absolute surprise. Although these two had only been together for less than a month, given the precariousness of their entire situation, Tre saw it appropriate go ahead and tie the knot with her.

Tre released his grip around Darnisha's waist, grabbed her hand and walked her over to the bed. He picked up a Gucci bag he had resting near the nightstand, threw it on the bed and opened it up, exposing an assortment of guns and knives. Darnisha kind of shuddered at the sight of the weapons. Shit, for a split second she thought his ruthless ass was pulling a trick on her and was about to kill her. But as he kept searching through the bag, he found what he was looking for – he pulled out a tiny black ring box. He opened it, took out what had to be at least a ten carat ring, and then proceeded to get down on one knee. "So, what do you say?" Tre asked with a tiny tear escaping out of his eye.

"Yes! YES!" Darnisha exclaimed once she realized he was being completely serious. Once he heard her say yes, he took the shiny ring and slipped it across her ring finger. Ironically, he didn't buy the ring for her truth be told – it was actually an engagement ring he bought for a previous fiancée who he ended up killing years ago after he found out she slept with one of the guys at the police station.

Tre stood up. Without hesitation he leaned in and wrapped his lips around Darnisha's. Slightly parting her lips, he welcomed her tongue.

Darnisha forgot just that quick this crazy nigga pounced on her ass like she was Tina Turner and forgot to sing the right note to "A Fool In Love". As their kissing intensified, Tre picked her up, and she wrapped her legs around his waist. Tre then carried her over to the bed and gently dropped her. She giggled as she slightly bounced, and the towel around her torso unwrapped. Tre grabbed the rough white hotel bathroom towel and pulled it from up under her and threw it to the side. Now completely naked, and her skin still moist and damp

from the shower, Darnisha's nipples hardened as cool air from them somewhat noisy wall AC circulated throughout the room and whisked around her brown areolas.

"Take them boxers off," she ordered, biting her lip with her finger in her mouth. Tre for once followed her command, and slid out of his boxers, exposing his already hard ten inch shaft.

Darnisha sat up in the bed and beckoned Tre to come closer. Once his jumpy dick was inches away from her face, she leaned in, grabbed his shaft with her right hand, and began to devour his dick like it was a garlic roll from Olive Garden. With the way this trick was gulping this nigga's dick, you would've thought this small-brained bitch was at Olive Garden, taking advantage of their $6.99 unlimited soup, salad and breadsticks special. Typical for a gutter hoe.

Continuing going up and down on his blood-engorged shaft, serving him up her usual nasty, soppy, spitty head, Tre closed his eyes and fucked her mouth and throat like it was some new pussy. His dickhead tingled in excitement as Darnisha tickled his tip with her tongue, tasting and slurping on the precum oozing from it.

Then all of a sudden, Tre pulled out and clenched his dick, stopping himself from busting a nut… "Whoooo, shit…God damn! I don't wanna bust yet!" Tre attempted to calm his rapid, ecstatic breathing. He needed to get it together. He hadn't been in some pussy now for days and now he was ready to tear her walls up. Tre pushed Darnisha on her back and then pulled her forward, spreading her legs so he could gawk down her pretty, bald, pink pussy already soaked the fuck up. Her coochie already had creamy bubbles and suds forming around her lips. He could smell that intoxicating pussy scent, and the more the smell hit his nostrils, the harder he got. Licking his lips as if he could already taste her nectar heavily dripping onto his tongue, he spread her thighs even wider for a better view. He dove his head right in between his legs, and then closed her thighs, wanting her to drown him out with her pussy juices.

"Mhrrmmmm, shiiit!" Darnisha moaned, closing her eyes, rubbing Tre's now bald head. As he continued devouring her pussy, Darnisha opened her eyes and looked to her left and then to her right. After a few seconds of contemplation, she closed her eyes again and took a deep breath. Tre was about to come up for air, but she clenched her legs harder, "Keep eatin' my shit, nigga, I'm about to squirt, don't stop!" she moaned.

"AHHHHHHHHHH!" Tre suddenly propped up, grabbing his upper back, wailing in pain. Darnisha, moments earlier, seeing the still opened Gucci bag now on the night stand, reached her hands in and grabbed a medium-sized bowie knife. This was her opportunity for freedom. Fuck being married to this nigga. This was not a part of the

Boss Bitch Come Up Plan…Not under these crazy ass circumstances. Right now shit seemed all good in the hood, but she knew damn well Tre was liable to kill her at any time when he saw suit. She knew he was a ruthless killer who'd do anything to survive, and knowing that, she knew it was a just matter of time before he'd get rid of her if necessary.

The moment she stabbed Tre in his back, she instantly pulled the knife out, ready to go at him again. His eyes widened in terror, "YOU FUCKIN' BITCH! I'MMA—"

SLASH! SLASH! Darnisha whooshed and whizzed the sharp hunter's knife across Tre's neck, his dark crimson blood rushing from the huge gash, splattering all over the bed and all over her naked body. He collapsed forward on top of her as a flood of blood created a vast lake in the bed. She rolled him over, and now on top of him, she drilled the knife in and out of his chest, tearing into his rib cage, damn near exposing his heart and lungs. With one more stab, you would've thought this bitch's name was Dr. Darnisha Johnson, head cardiothoracic surgeon for the University of Chicago and she was operating on Tre, giving him emergency open heart surgery.

Tre, quickly slipping into death, continued choking on his blood as his eyes rolled in the back of his head. Within seconds, he stopped fighting the urge to survive, and his body became motionless…and lifeless.

Darnisha, completely painted in Tre's thick maroon blood, got up from the bed and threw the knife on the ground. Making her way to the bathroom, once inside, she stared in the mirror, examining just how much blood she was covered in. She turned her body left, then right. She let out a light yet crazy chuckle. "Fuck that shit. Marriage is for weak bitches." She turned on the shower to the hottest temperature, letting it run for a few minutes to form a dense steamy bath. Once the temperature was to her liking, she stepped her feet into the shower and pulled the curtain back.

Chapter Forty-Two

Back in Chicago...Hours earlier.

"Kinda fucked up this hoe ass nigga staying up in a high rise in Downtown but still got his fuckin' old lady living in the slums…" Gemini looked back at Cato and laughed, "You ready to die, clown ass nigga?"

The three guys along with Cato's immobilized punk ass in the back, were still out on the far south side in a closed off abandoned lot that once housed a factory. With virtually no houses or businesses around, all you could hear were millions of crickets chirping away in the early partly cold morning.

"Please, bruh! Please man! I ain't even really 'bout dat life!" Cato begged, crying his heart away, hoping Gemini would spare him.

"TeKashi, you really wanna kill this clown? He's too man." Gemini asked. TeKashi, seated up at the front, looked back, "Ehh, I'm good actually boss….ACTUALLY you know what…Now that I think about it , can I just do one thing before we let this pussaz nigga walk?"

"What's that?"

TeKashi whipped out a box cutter, "He likes giving herpes and shit to girls…"

Gemini smiled, "Have at it, youngin'." And with that being said, TeKashi hopped out the truck and walked over to the back of the Expedition, and popped the trunk open. "Fucking hoe ass nigga," TeKashi growled. He pulled Cato out the truck, down to the grassy ground and quickly snatched his jeans and boxers off his legs, exposing his hairy, medium flaccid young dick. "That's all you was workin' with?!? And you goin' around giving bitches the itch and shit!?!?" Cato tried to move and resist, but with being shot in both feet and his hands still handcuffed behind his back, he could only quiver like a guppie that popped out of a fish bowl and landed on the floor. Without hesitation TeKashi cupped Cato's entire scrotum in his hand, like he was about to cock ring on him, and ruthlessly sawed away at his junk.

"AHH! AHHHHHHHHHHH!" Cato screamed as blood leaked down his legs and into the grassy, cold and slightly moist ground. Gemini, observing everything from his back seat looking through the trunk, busted out laughing, "Damn, TeKashi, nigga you crazy as fuck! Let's bounce!"

TeKashi gave Cato one huge punt into his stomach and spit on him, "Guess yo ass gon be a fuckin' Priest now, stupid ass nigga."

Once TeKashi made his way back to the truck, the three hittas

made their way up north to South Loop to get at their next target – Poot.

~

"Looks like they got a doorman… Guess we'll be sending him to an early retirement." Gemini loaded up his Glock, screwed the silencer in on the top of the barrel and wiped it down with the jacket's end. "Ya'll ready?"

"Yeah," Fat Trel and TeKashi said in unison. "Good, let's bounce…" The three Brick Squad hittas hopped out the truck parked on a side street across from the luxury highrise. At this time of the early morning all you could hear were the echoes of street sweeping trucks, distant police sirens and the jankling of homeless people pushing grocery carts down the street.

With Gemini at the lead, TeKashi and Fat Trel trailed Gemini as his look out. Once they made their way inside the building, they approached the doorman, "Sir, do you know where—"

POW! Gemini without warning nor a fucking care in the world sent a slug right into the old white man's head. "Sorry…" Fat Trel then reached over the doorman's desk and shot at the computers running the building's security cameras.

Gemini and his two back up shootas mad their way to the elevators. Once they got to Poot's floor, they marched with brazen confidence to his apartment. Checking the scene one last time, Gemini pulled out a lock pick and within seconds was able to pop the door open. Slowly creaking the door open, the three men moved in silence into the vastly dark living room of Poot's condo.

"Ahhhh! Ahhh! Ahhhhhh!" A baby's cries echoed throughout the condo. Gemini's eyes widened in surprise. Fuck, he thought. There was a baby there with Poot. Seconds later, he heard ruffling, and the three niggas suddenly ducked and hid behind a couch. "Ahhhh, it's ok, mommy's here! Mommy's here!" It was Poot's baby mama…

Gemini could sense that she had meandered into a different room. Gemini looked at Trel and TeKashi and nodded to the room where she was at. That was their cue to go and grab her and the baby hold them until he reappeared. Doing as he commanded, the two hittas moved silently to the room. Her back was turned to the door of the baby's room. Trel slowly walked up behind her, GASP! She felt Trel's thick, gloved hand wrap around her mouth and the barrel of his gun touch the temple of her head. TeKashi walked in and took the baby out of her hands and rocked the baby back to silence. As she quivered at the site of this young goon rocking her baby, her eyes turned to nervous squints and tears escaped the ducts of her eyes.

Gemini, still in the living room, sauntered through the dark hallway towards the master bedroom. Suddenly he heard ruffling from bed sheets and thumping footsteps making its way out the room. Gemini then quickly hid behind a wall. Poot marched down the hall sluggishly, wiping his eyes. “Baby, where you at?!? What’s wrong with Jay—”

THUMP! Gemini pistol whipped the big, tall goon. His body instantly slumped to the floor.

~

Poot’s eyes slowly opened, and all he could see was Gemini’s thick muscular face and well trimmed beard gawking him down. Quickly realizing he was handcuffed with his hands behind his back, and thick rope confining him to one of the dining room chairs, he scrunched his face up in angst and confusion, “Gemini… Why didn’t you just kill me?” he said, dizziness from the pistol whip on the back of his head still perforating throughout his colossal body.

“You don’t fear death…you welcome it. Your punishment must be more severe,” Gemini growled, leaning forward into his face, centimeters away from his mouth, so close if he was gay, he would’ve French kissed him.

Poot, with his unblinking eyes, didn’t respond. His eyes turned to slit. Silence filled the room.

“That was from Batman…” Gemini chuckled.

Poot still didn’t respond.

“Anyways, I’m gonna make this short and simple. Where the fuck is that nigga Tre?”

“You already know my answer…” Poot responded with dark solemn stamped in his tone. Gemini knew what he meant. He wasn’t going to snitch. Poot was a veteran street soldier, so he already knew death before dishonor. Loyalty over everything…. That is until you use what someone is willing to die for to make them speak.

Gemini turned his attention to Fat Trel. Seconds later, Fat Trel emerged from the darkness of the living room with Poot’s baby mama in his clutch. TeKashi, behind him, was still holding he baby in his dry, tatted up hands still covered in Cato’s blood.

“You gon tell me where he’s at now?” Gemini asked with a small smirk.

“You already know my answer…”

“Really, nigga? You that fuckin’ loyal? Loyal like a fuckin’ hound dog? Trel, go ahead and drop that bitch.”

“NOO! NOOOOOOO! BABY PLEASE JUST TELL HIM! PLEASE!” Poot’s baby mama screamed and begged at the top of her lungs,

asking her man to let up and give these crazy niggas Tre's whereabouts.

His eyes, still unblinking slits, looked at his baby's mama unfazed. "Sorry, Lisa…" he apologized because he knew what these niggas were about to do. Kill his bitch. Poot was standing by his word. He couldn't snitch on his nigga like that. Tre would do the same.

Trel marched Lisa over to the sliding door attached to the condo's balcony. Once the two were outside, Trel was waiting for final confirmation from bossman. Gemini looked at Trel and then back at Poot. "You sure you don't wanna change that answer? I'm willing to let you, her and the baby live. This really ain't got nothin' to do with you. It got everything to do with Tre, that crazy ass bitch Darnisha and Tasia…"

"Where is she? How do you know about her? I warned Tre about her…She's a fighter."

"So you helped him?"

"Yes…Reluctantly. He was on the fence too. Sex trafficking ain't our thang. You of all people should know that."

"So why he do it?"

"I asked the same fuckin' question. 'Cuz he only got $10,000 out the deal. Chump change if you ask me. Then again, he came to his senses and got more out of it. Darnisha's bitch almost killed him over it too…"

"Her bitch?"

"Yeah, the dike she was fuckin'…Ryann. One of our guys."

The more Gemini listened to Poot, the more he was confused about everything. Doing his best to piece together the story quickly and how he'd even arrive to this point, he wandered if Tre even needed to be offed. Granted, these niggas were his rivals, and during a different time, blood would've been shed. But that was then. This is now. It was apparent now based on what Poot was telling him that Tre was just blindsided by a trifling, snakey ass gutter bitch who just wanted money. That bitch went through great lengths, sold of her own niece, just to get fucking money. Nothing else.

"Where is she? Is she safe? I'm assuming you rescued her…"

"She committed suicide. When she found out about Tahmir, she killed herself."

"Oh you ain't heard?"

"Heard what?"

"Tahmir ain't dead. He blew up the County and escaped. I thought he was gonna be here with you."

Gemini scrunched his face up in disgust. Was this nigga really being fucking serious right now? "Nigga…How dare you mock and disrespect my dead brother like that? You think I'm playing a fucking

game with you right now?"

"Why would I lie? You got me tied the fuck up. You 'bout to throw my bitch over the damn balcony. Probably my only child too. I don't play fuckin' games."

Gemini looked at Poot, and within seconds his disgust with this last revelation turned to surprise. If Tahmir was truly alive, why hadn't he tried to get into contact with him? Why not go to Papi's house? None of it made sense and truth be told, Tahmir being the type of family man he was, would've by now made his presence known to a select few. But then it hit him…He'd remembered years ago Tahmir telling him that if push came to shove, and if he ever got locked up for some shit he didn't do, he was going to make his way out one way or another – either by suicide or by fire. Tahmir chose fire. Butterflies of surprise and anxiety formed in the pits of Gemini's stomach just thinking that his brother was actually still alive. The only thing was, if Tahmir was out, he was out to get vengeance. He was hunting down Tre and Darnisha too, which meant he was probably somewhere still in Chicago, roaming the streets, ready to kill any and everything. But then doubt quickly returned Gemini. This nigga Poot was lying to him. The lie worked for a second, throwing him off his murder game.

"Throw that bitch over the ledge…" Gemini commanded Trel.

"NO!" Poot's eyes amplified in fear as he tried to stop the other big goon from throwing his innocent baby mama over the balcony. But before his cry could intervene and save Lisa, it was too late.

"NOO! AHH! AHHHH!" Her screams echoed outside and in the dark cold early morning sky as Trel flung her over the ledge like a soda can. With her body falling down thirty flights, seconds later, a loud thump splashed on top of a car parked along the side street in front of the building. The car's alarm instantly went off, echoing down the street.

"OHHHH SHIT!" A man's voice echoed. It was some homeless nigga stumbling down the street like he had fifty brews running in his system.

Poot's face tightened and screwed up in fear and grief as he just witnessed the unrelenting ruthless goon toss his baby's mother over the balcony without any fucking care or remorse. Tears swelled in his reddened eyes and he let out a tiny wail, "Please man, just not the baby. Just not the baby."

"Where the fuck is Tre? I'm giving you one more opportunity, or that baby is next."

Poot lowered and shook his head no as spittle mixed with dripping salty sweat from his brow formed at the corners of his mouth. "I ccc-can't…," he stammered.

Gemini nodded at TeKashi, who then made his way to the balcony.

TeKashi smiled and growled, dangling the baby by one arm as he uncontrollably cried.

"Drop hi—"

"NOO! NOO! He's in ATL!"

"TeKashi, bring the boy back inside." TeKashi and Trel walked back into the living room and closed the sliding glass balcony door. They sat down on the couch adjacent to Gemini and Poot.

"Atlanta…What kind of car was he in?"

"A black Maserati…"

"He was with Darnisha, huh?"

"Yeah…"

"Where's your cell phone?"

"On my charger in the room."

"TeKashi, go get that shit." TeKashi jumped from the couch and dashed to the bedroom. Seconds later he came back out with the phone in his hand and handed it to Gemini. "What's the passcode?"

"1856…"

Once Gemini unlocked the phone, he pulled up his contact's list. "Ya'll just talked not too long ago."

"What's his next plan?"

"He's gon be there for a few days. He's staying at a Holiday Inn in Stone Mountain."

"Then what…"

"They goin' to Miami and then to Jamaica."

"Thanks," Gemini smiled and then looked at Trel and TeKashi. "Drop this disloyal ass nigga."

"NOO! NOOOOO!" Poot screamed and cried as the two goons approached him, yanked him off the seat and dragged him to the balcony. Gemini slid the door open and the two hittas picked up Poot's heavy ass and without thinking about it, even as his screams and cries reverberated through the air, they rolled him over the ledge. Seconds later, a louder thud pounced against another car, and a bunch of car alarms went off at the same time.

"AHHHH! SHIT! SHIIIIIIT!" The same drunk homeless man shouted, this time taking the fuck off and down the street like he was Carl Lewis in the '88 Olympics.

Gemini picked the baby up, went to his room and rocked him to sleep. "Sorry little man for doing that to your mother." Gemini then put the baby in his crib and tucked him under the blanket.

"Let's bounce…We going to the A."

~

"Yo, yo, stop for a second, what the fuck is up with all those cops?"

Tahmir barked at his taxi cab driver who was coming up Dearborn street.

"Ehh, I dun know… You wan still go there? That's deh buildin'" The African taxi cab driver looked at Tahmir in his rear view mirror asking the question.

"Drive by them slow," Tahmir commanded. Following his order, the taxi slowly drove by, and as they got closer and closer to the front entrance of the building, hundreds of flashing blue and red lights from cop cars and fire trucks danced all around the neighborhood. A thick crowd of onlookers formed outside the building, and there was even a news crew setting up from afar. As the taxi cab barreled closer to the red tape roped off crime scene, Tahmir looked out the window through his unblinking eyes. He looked down and saw Poot's body stretched out on the ground as some police officers covered it up with a white sheet. "KEEP IT MOVIN'!" A cop escorting traffic yelled at the taxi. As soon as the cop grimaced deep into the musty and incense-smelling interior staring directly at the unassuming driver, the taxi took off.

Tahmir sat back in his seat, bewildered. Someone got to Poot before he did. "Fuck," he growled. He just knew that was his opportunity to get to Tre. After getting to Jashaun, he eventually was able to get enough info to piece together who was behind the entire nefarious plot. Darnisha was fucking with Ryann. Ryann used to bang with Tre. Tre with Poot. But now that Poot was dead, and he couldn't get wind of Tre nor Darnisha's whereabouts, he didn't know exactly what to do next. He had no idea where Tasia was at.

"Where to now, suh?" The driver asked.

"O'Hare…Take me to O'Hare. I'm gettin' the fuck out of here. Far away. Far far away."

"Where's that?"

"Saudi Arabia to make hajj. And then to Senegal. I can't live in this bullshit no more."

"You Muslim?"

"Yessir…"

"As-Salaam Alaikum."

"Wa-Alaikum As-Salaam, my brother…"

On their way to the airport, which was about a good thirty-minute drive, the two men suddenly became good buddies, and chopped it up, talking about Islam. Ahmado, the taxi cab driver, was ironically from the Gambia, which was right next door to Senegal. Once they'd arrived at the international terminal at the airport, Tahmir and the cab driver got out, gave each other a huge hug and kissed on both sides of the cheek, customary for Muslims.

"You take it easy, my brother. I have something for you for your

travel," Ahmadu then went back into his car and gave Tahmir a Holy Qur'an and a set of prayer beads. "My Sheikh, the great late Muhammadu Bamba gave me this. Keep praying and hold tight to the rope of Allah, my dear friend. And have faith that all things are possible when you submit everything to the will of Allah."

"Yes my brother," Tahmir responded with a tear in his eye. In that short thirty minute ride, he formed an unbreakable genuine bond with the driver. He took hold to the gift and made his way inside to the al-Arabiya Airlines gate. Once he got past security, showing them a fake passport and ID, he grabbed some coffee and sat down, sipping away as he opened the Qur'an. He pulled out a letter he'd received when he was in solitary confinement, awaiting his arraignment. It was from Tasia.

Reading over the letter once more, his eyes glanced over the very words he told her when he first met her, 'make the impossible possible.' He scrunched the letter up and began to wail. He just hoped wherever she was at, she was safe, and no harm was being done to her. He didn't want to leave truth be told. Tasia, in the short time he knew her, was the daughter he never had. The daughter he always wanted. But this journey – this next part of his life was necessary. He had to do it in order to purge himself of everything. He didn't even want to bother to get into contact with his brother or his father. He wanted Gemini to stay put in Texas and keep doing his thing as a martial arts instructor and tutor, and he wanted his father to enjoy his "retirement." He didn't want the potential stress of trying to hide him and look out for him to bog them down. It would be better for them to just assume he was dead.

"Flight 1501 – Leaving Chicago going to Riyadh, Saudi Arabia will be boarding in the next 15 minutes… Please have your passports handy to expedite the boarding process."

Tahmir cracked open his "passport," and laughed, looking at his picture. His new name now was Tahmir Sayfallah. Sayfallah meaning the "sword of Allah".

Once the plane boarded, Mr. Sayfallah, with nothing on him other than a few dollars, a cheap pay-as-you-go Android phone, and the clothes on his back took off, leaving the United States, never coming back.

Chapter Forty-Three

The Chicago Fire Department's Ambulance sped down the busy North Avenue, racing against traffic, time and fate, doing their best to get the 17-year-old young black woman to the Emergency Room.

"Come on, Tasia, come on! You're gonna make it baby girl! You're gonna make it! Hold on, ok!" Gemini, frantic and frightened, was holding Tasia's cold, stiff hand as she lay strapped onto a gurney inside the ambulance. Her head was cocked to the side. Her eyes glassy and barely open. Her pupils dilating, staring off into hazy space.

FLATLINE! Suddenly the EKG monitor hooked up to Tasia went flat, creating that familiar resonating sharp sound letting everyone in the ambulance know the young girl's barely beating heart stopped. "Sir move back, for a second!" One of the EMTs shoved Gemini out the way so they could quickly prepare to resuscitate her. Another EMT took a scalpel from a tray sitting on a small counter, tore down her shirt, ripped it off her torso then unclipped her bra, exposing her bare brown chest. Then another EMT detached the atrial defibrillation device from the ambulance's side wall and quickly glued the web of shock pads onto her chest and rib cage.

"Clear…" *SHOCK!*

Tasia's body jolted. The second her body jumped Gemini 's jerked as well. It was almost as if he could feel the jolt of the machine's electricity run through his motionless, seemingly lifeless body. "Come on, baby girl! Please!" Gemini shrieked.

The moment Tasia's heart stopped, she immediately slipped into unconsciousness. But all of a sudden she saw in her eyes what appeared to be an overwhelming bright light at the end of a tunnel. She could faintly hear Gemini beseeching her to come back, but the bright light was beckoning her even more.

The EMTs reset the AED machine to give another round of life-saving electricity. "Clear…" SHOCK! Tasia suddenly came back to partial consciousness and her eyes widened, staring directly into Gemini's beautiful brown face. She could see tears escaping from his eyes, begging her not to die. She wanted to live, but all the energy in

her body was sucked out of her, and she was already at peace with her inevitable fate. Her eyes dithered off again. Her heart stopped. Then she slipped back into unconsciousness. The bright light at the end of the tunnel appeared again. This time, her soul escaped her body and zoomed down the tunnel. Then she saw a long, angelic brown hand stretching out to her, welcoming her. A heavenly woman's voice, eerily similar to her mother's called her name, "Tasia, I love you. It's so nice to see you again. I've missed you so much." Hearing the voice raptured her with so much disbelief, surprise and ecstasy. She now knew for sure the voice was that of her mother's the more she heard it. A tear escaped the corner of her eye. Her mom was welcoming her to the blissful eternal abodes of heaven.

The EMTs went to go try one more time to bring the girl back to life. "Clear…" SHOCK! Her body jerked and Tasia zipped at a million miles per hour out of the tunnel and back into her body, fully conscious. Her eyes enlarged once more, and she stared at Gemini bawling uncontrollably, Papi at his side consoling him. "Come on, Tasia. Don't do this." Gemini begged, still gently rubbing her hand.

Five minutes later, the EMTs finally arrived at the ER. Once they stopped, they hopped out the back, detached her stretcher from the rails inside the ambulance and rushed her inside the emergency room. As she zipped through the crowded, busy hallway of the ER, all she could see through her hazy eyes were glimpses of rooms filled with sick and dying people. Nurses and doctors tending to their bedside.

She could feebly hear Gemini's deep and crying voice, behind her, still pleading with her not to die. Finally, once she got into a cold hospital room, the EMTs prepared to transfer her from the gurney to the bed in the room. "One, two, three!" Once they laid her in and adjusted her body, an army of nurses and doctors flooded the room. Gemini and Papi off in the corner, were eventually led out the room by a nurse telling them she was going to be in good care. However, Tasia wanted to tell him goodbye. Deep down in her spirit she knew that would be the last time she'd ever see him again. Her liberator. Her comrade. Her second hero. Tahmir being the first.

Once Gemini and Papi were out the room, all she saw were old doctors hovering over her, picking at her, examining what she'd done to land herself in this fucked up situation. Then one of the nurses came to her side, slid a needle in her arm and then hooked an IV up to her. Within seconds, the unknown substance running through her veins wrapped her body in weird yet warm blissful numbness. Minutes later, she slowly slipped back into unconsciousness. Her soul detached from her body, and she floated above and to the ceiling of the room, able to closely observe and hear everything going on. She could see the doctors racing to do CPR on her again and get ready to shock her

back to life. Doing the best they could to stop her from dying again, the doctors opened her mouth and ran a long tube down her throat and into her stomach to pump out whatever it was she took to attempt suicide.

Then, a very vast blue and purple sparkling light illuminated the corner of the room, overtaking Tasia's vision as she still floated above her motionless body. She was so mesmerized by the light that her essence or spirit was instantly magnetized by its stunningly beautiful and attractive force. As her soul approached the light, she could see deep within it a crystal highway running to infinity. Once she stepped inside the light and onto the highway, a powerful, godly and goliath hand reached out and pulled her a million miles per hour. Traversing down the highway, she looked around could see herself leaving earth and the universe, making her way into a new realm beyond all imagination.

Once she arrived at the new dimension, a host of hundreds of angelic being surrounded her and hugged her. "You are loved, my child. You are loved. You are safe and secure in the arms of God. You are loved," the voices harmonized in unison. The sound of their voices was so overwhelmingly beautiful and delightful, Tasia cried rivers of joyful tears. The host of angelic beings parted and then her eyes widened in complete amazement, she finally saw what she'd longed for years…her mother. Latasha, dressed in an all-white satin robe approached her with her arms wide open. She wrapped her arms around her only child and kissed her forehead. "I've missed you so much, Tasia. I've been waiting an eternity to see you again."

"II-I—II've missed you too, ma!" Tasia cried as she held her mother tightly, crying and trembling. "Ohhh, don't cry! Please don't cry! Look, I have another gift to give you. Follow me."

Suddenly her mother grabbed her and the two floated into another dimension and into what reminded her of Marcia's room, except this room was bigger and glowed with the same blue and purple illuminous light she saw earlier. She looked around and it was exactly the type of bedroom Marcia always used to say she wanted when she got older. A vast library filled with a collection of all types of books lined the walls that ran into eternity. Posters of science fiction and fantasy movies line the wall. As Tasia looked closely, they seemed real, all to real as the characters actually moved and talked.

"Tasia!" The second Tasia heard her name being called, she turned around and saw Marcia running to her, with her arms stretched out! "M-mm-maarcia!" Tasia stammered as her eyes swelled with more tears of surprise and joy.

They embraced and held each other for what seemed like forever. Marcia's love and excitement of seeing her friend overpowered Tasia's

spiritual being. They released from each other's embrace, wiping each other's tears.

"Tasia…" Her mom called, and she immediately turned around. As her mother approached her, she looked down at her face and wiped more tears streaming out of her eyes. "You have to a make a choice… To be here or to go back. If you go back though, I promise you, your life will be just as wonderful as heaven."

"I wanna stay here! I don't wanna go—"

"Shhh, I know. I know you wanna stay. We want you to stay too, but you have the power to make the choice. There are a lot of people who love you down there too. People rooting for you. People who need your help. So many children you've yet to know."

"I wanna stay! I wanna be with you and Marcia, and I wanna see Tahmir. Is Tahmir here?"

"Tahmir is not here…" Her mother consoled.

"He's not??" Tasia felt nervous to her core and wandered if Tahmir was in hell. After all, he was not a perfect soul, and probably committed certain sins that prohibited him from being to gain access to heaven.

"What do you want to do Tasia?"

Tasia looked at her mother and then at Marcia. Marcia, holding her hands as if she was saying a prayer, looked at Tasia and smiled. "I love you. I will always love you."

Her mother looked at her, saying the same thing. Tasia's eyes turned to squints as more and more tears flowed down her face. A powerful, glowing force, so powerful that it was blinding to Tasia harkened her presence. Tasia looked at the force and stood in absolute awe. It had to be God.

"Tasia," the deep Morgan Freeman sounding voice called her name.

"I will always look after you my child. I will be there always. Come, follow me, I am going to fill you with wisdom." God's voice commanded. Instantly Tasia's soul flashed into a vast, infinite beach. Waves of crystal blue, sparkling water crashed onto the glowing diamondesque sand. Tasia looked up and across the orange and amethyst cloudless sky as angelic beings soaring across the divine expanse. "Walk, my child…Walk." God's voice commanded.

Tasia, following God's order, walked along the soft, glowing sand, leaving a trail of footprints. Every time she walked, another set of footprints formed next to hers. Then she saw flashes of her life appear in the sky as if it was massive television screen. Those flashes of her life though were dark, harrowing memories of when she was being tortured and tormented by everyone. Darnisha. Jashaun. Jasmine. She saw those instances of herself crying. Praying. Begging God for help,

hoping to make it another day. As she kept walking, she saw just one set of footprints during her darkest times in her life. Then the voice of God whispered, “When you were at your lowest, I was there…Holding you. Carrying you. That’s why you see only one set of footprints. I’m your rock of ages, here and forever more.” “Yes…” Tasia cried. And once she understood what God was telling her, suddenly her soul zipped into the vast and sparkling sky.

Chapter Forty-Four

"…Yeah, I Momma, Miss Ivana
Usually rock the Prada, sometimes Gabbana
Stick you for your cream and your riches
Zsa Zsa Gabor, Demi Moore, Prince Diana and all them rich bitches
Puff Daddy pump the Hummer for the summer
I follow- in the E-Class with the goggles
96 models, Bad Click on the stroll
(Tell 'em how we roll) Cruise control
Nothin' make a woman feel betta'
Than Berrettas and Amarettas, butta leathers and mad cheddas
Chillin in a Benz with my ami-gos
Tryin' to stick a nigga for his pe-sos
If you say so's, then I'm the same chick
That you wanna get with, lick up in my twat
Gotta hit the spot, if not don't test the poom poom
Nanny nanny, punanny donny, hey!"

Zooming down I-75, a good twenty minutes south of the dividing line between Florida and Georgia, Darnisha's psychotic gutter hoe ass was bobbing her head, signing in a raspy off key to the lyrics of Lil Kim's "No Time" – the mother of all THOT bitch ballads.

Sticking her tongue out, pointing in the air like she was THE Queen B Boss Bitch, Darnisha had the top pulled back on the two-seater black Maserati. Warm air breezed through her now short haircut. A pair of Prada shades adorned her face. Weaving in and out of the light traffic on the South Georgia country expressway, Darnisha raced to get to Miami ASAP.

Luckily for her, after she killed Tre, she left his body back in the hotel room and dipped the fuck out in possession of all the money she still had from selling off Tasia and then some. Before Tre left, he'd took out close to $250,000 in cash from his bank and had it stuffed in an extra duffle bag. Also, she still had a copy of her original license, her "new" license, her fake passport (she never had one from the beginning), a tote of guns and knives along with other shit that gave

her the clear ability to now put the Boss Bitch Come Up plan back online and in full effect.

Too bad for Tre, she thought. If he wasn't acting so paranoid and didn't end up fucking her up, she would've been more inclined to listen to him and follow him wherever he wanted to go. But the day he bailed her out and ended up beating her ass like she stole something from him, he revealed another side to her she couldn't trust. Granted, he had some good ass dick and could eat pussy like he was a fat bitch that had a 24-hour pass to Golden Corral. But good dick, she knew, could make bitches go blind from reality. In her final assessment of him, Tre was ruthless, crazy and psychotic just as she was. When he proposed, she gave it good thought and consideration – at least for a good minute or so. But the moment he opened that bag and revealed his weaponry, she knew she had to get her hands on one of those guns or knives and liberate herself and get back to what was best for her. Fuck Tre. Fuck his plans. She was now all about self.

Driving down the expressway, making herself closer and closer to Florida, she knew she was going to have to eventually stop for gas. She just didn't know when and where. She had about a good half tank left and she figured since the Maserati was a V6, she had about another two hours before she'd need to stop. Listening to music blaring from the radio, she felt kind of bad though for leaving her two kids behind without telling them anything. But at the end of the day, she knew that what she was doing was ultimately best for them and for herself. She finally came to the bittersweet realization that being a mother, especially at her age, just wasn't for her. It wasn't the life she wanted. Not the life she expected. But when she got pregnant, it was something she just had to deal with and make the best of the situation for the time being. Thinking about Jashaun though bothered her the most. For Jasmine, she knew she'd be alright. Boot camp was turning her into a different woman, and although it wasn't the type of woman she wanted her to be, at least she'd evolve into a woman who could hopefully take care of herself, get a job, live a normal life and die. However, Jashaun, given that now he was handicapped for the rest of his life – both because of his HIV diagnosis and having brain damage – she still felt the urge and need to rectify his situation.

Sticking to his promise, she eventually discovered that the prosecutor working on Tahmir's case had a GoFundMe site up and running and he already raised close to $40,000 for Jashaun's medical costs. Fucked up part about it was that could've been her money, but oh well, she figured it would be enough money to take care of Jashaun and whatever he needed for the time being. However, once she got to Miami, and then eventually Jamaica, she was going to do her best to still send the boy money. She had to. Her conscience was

eating her alive just knowing she went to the extreme of hiring an ultra-violent serial rapist and AIDS-having undercover homosexual to rape and pillage her son. All because of her own greed and want of fast cash.

Finally erasing her thoughts of guilt, about a good hour and a half had passed, and the gas light on the Maserati flashed orange. "Fuck…" Darnisha grumbled under her breath. Darnisha didn't know shit about Florida and its different cities. Every time she thought about the state, her mind fixed on Miami and Orlando. She never realized Florida, outside those two cities, was pretty much the deep south. Continuing to zoom down the expressway, she was hoping she'd see a sign letting her know the next closest city. She had a good twenty minutes left before she most definitely would need to stop to get gas.

"Gainesville – 10 Miles…" Darnisha muttered as she saw a highway sign letting her know the next closest town was ten miles away.

Ten minutes later, Darnisha hopped off the expressway and made her way into the outskirts of Gainesville. Up until now she'd never heard of Gainesville, but from what she could tell by all the billboards up this was a college town – home to the University of Florida.

Finally finding a BP Gas station, she pulled into an empty pump, quickly hopped out the car and made her way inside the station. "Can I get $60 on pump number four?" Darnisha slid the old white man behind the register a $100 bill.

"Wow, nice car for a gal...You must not be from 'round here?" The old white man licked his lips and smiled, exposing his rotten, cigarette stained teeth. He looked Darnisha up and down like he wanted to get a quick Sam's Club sample taste of her pussy.

"No, I'm not. Can I just have my change please?"

He slid her two $20 bills and without warning creepily touched her hand. She snatched her hand back with the bills clutched her hand. "Eww," she scrunched her face up in surprise and made her way out of the station back to the pump. "Old ass cracka…"

Once she popped the Maserati's gas cap cover and slid the gas pump in, she impatiently waited, hoping the $60 will top off the gas tank and then she could bounce the fuck out of this small ass country college town.

About a minute later, a dark navy blue Mercedes Maybach with tinted windows pulled up to a pump next to her. She looked at the back Florida tag, "CEO" was inscribed into the plate. "Hrrrm," Darnisha wondered who was in the long $200,000 luxury sedan. Seemed kind of odd because when she earlier pulled into the gas station, she had the only luxury car. Everyone else were in pick up trucks and beat up four door sedans.

Seconds later – a tall, dark brown skinned nigga who kind of reminded Darnisha of Morris Chestnut emerged from the driver's side of the car. Instantly seeing his muscles pop out of his expensive Italian pin stripe suit made her pussy wet and creamy. This nigga was beyond sexy. He quickly glanced over at her and smiled and then slid his black credit card in into pump's credit card slot. Once he slid the gas pump into his Maybach and set it to pump automatically, he sauntered over Darnisha, "Excuse me, Miss. Sorry to bother you, but wow, that is a nice car. That's a 2018 Maserati GranTurismo. You must not be from around here?"

Darnisha blushed, "No I'm not…I'm from Chicago."

"Wow, Chi-town. I've not been there a hot minute." Suddenly he stepped back for a moment and looked cautious, "Sorry if I am being extra-nosey, I'm not bothering you, am I?" Looking concerned that he didn't want to come off as stalkerish, he quickly became silent.

"No, not at all…Yeah, I'm actually headed to Miami. Trying to get there before sunset."

"What a fucking coincidence, I'm on my way there too. I'm Deon Washington."

Darnisha extended her hand, "Darnisha…Darnisha Johnson…"

"Nice to meet you. Anyways, you have a safe trip and enjoy your time in Miami!" Deon turned on his feet and made his way back to his Maybach. He took out the gas pump from his Maybach and closed the gas tank lid on the car. Darnisha opened her car door and got in, but before she could take off, Deon waltzed back over to her car. She rolled down her car window, "Sup?"

"Ehh…I don't know. But, I just have this weird feeling…Anyways, let me just cut straight to the chase. You are an absolutely gorgeous woman. I'm on my way to Miami. So are you. I'd love for us to possibly connect some time. Here's my card…" Deon extended his hand and handed Darnisha a thick business card. She glanced down at it, "Deon McKenzie Washington – CEO/President, Teflon Don Entertainment…"

She gasped…She'd heard of Teflon Don before. They were one of the hottest record labels based out of Miami, and they even signed big time acts under them. At one point in time, Nicki Minaj and Yo Gotti were signed to the label. "Sure, thank you so much…I'd love to connect as well," Darnisha smiled.

FUCCKKK! She thought. This was the ultimate dream come true. And now everything was finally making sense to her. God arranged and ordained everything she went through in her life to come to this point. She finally met a real boss. Not some trap king. Not some corrupt cop and hitta. Not some savage ChiRaq nigga. Her eyes finally landed the best catch of her existence – a CEO of a major record label

and it was apparent he was actively pursuing her.

"Thanks, beautiful…" Deon then made his way back to his Maybach, chucked the engine and took off out of the gas station's parking lot. Darnisha, doing the same, hopped on the expressway. While driving, she pulled out his business card and called him on the car's Bluetooth system.

"Deon Washington?" He answered

"Hey Deon, it's Darnisha…I'm behind you…"

"Ahahaha! I know," he chuckled. The two spent the next two hours or so talking to each other. Dominating the conversation, he bragged about how he'd got started in the music industry. Then he talked about all the current crazy gossip circulating on TMZ and shit. It was now nearly 3 PM and Deon told her he needed to pull over again and stop to get more gas. Eventually hopping off the expressway, the two pulled into a Chevron gas station right on the outskirts of Orlando. Although she didn't need gas, while he pumped his gas, she spent the next few minutes chopping it up with him.

"Are you hungry?" Deon asked. "I know of this awesome seafood restaurant in Downtown Orlando. McCormick and Schmicks. Have you heard of them?"

"Nah, not really. That sounds like one of them five star restaurants though…I don't know all about that. I don't even have the attire for that."

"Hahahah, don't worry. Let's just g stop and get you something to wear."

"Ahh, Deon, I don't need you to do all that. We can't just go to some local BBQ restaurant or somethin'? She asked looking a tad hesitant.

"Hah! Baby girl, you are a boss. Queens don't eat with peasants. Besides, if push comes to shove, and we need to spend the night here, I have a penthouse condo not too far away from the restaurant. I got an extra room. Lots of them actually. No pressure, but I'm just sayin'…"

Darnisha was absolutely fucking flattered of course. With her face turning red by the millisecond, "Ok," flowed easily out of her mouth. After they left the gas station, the two headed to the mall to search for an outfit. Going straight to a Saks Fifth Avenue, Darnisha felt like she was a little child lost in Disney world. She scoured through dresses, looking for the perfect outfit to wear for tonight. She didn't want to wear anything that was too hoeish. But she eventually found the right one to accentuate her curves and match her new hairdo.

"I think I like this dress," Darnisha smiled as she showed off the black backless Gucci bodycon as she stood next to one of the clothing racks. Deon right next to her smiled, "Go try it on."

The pair made their way to the dressing room. “Just one item?” the dressing room attendant, some young white bitch with a fake smirk on her face asked Darnisha. “Yes…”

Once Darnisha trekked her way into her dressing room, Deon stood idle outside, waiting for her to come out.

“How long you been workin’ here?” Deon asked the dressing room attendant. With her eyes glued to her phone, she looked up at Deon and squinted. “Ehh, about a good year.”

“You do this full-time or part-time…”

“Part-time…I’m in school.”

“What school?”

“UCF – I’m getting my degree in bus—” The white girl paused for a moment. “Wait a minute, I know who you ar—”

“Shhh…” Deon leered.

She recognized Deon. Damn near looking like she was about to cry, she fumbled through her phone and around her little makeshift desk, quickly trying to search for a piece of paper and pen to get his autograph. “Ohmygod, ohmygod!”

“I got you, young lady,” Deon pulled out his business card, an expensive ass sterling silver fountain pen and signed away. He handed her the business card, “You looking for an internship?”

“Yyyyea-yeah,” she stuttered.

“Cool, give me a call anytime…Also, go take a break or something,” He beamed once more, and this time had a stack of all hundred dollar bills in his hand. “Just give me like fifteen ok?

“Okk,” The girl suddenly flipped a sign next to the dressing room that said it was closed. With a prospective internship in her hand along with at least $2,000 in cash, damn near a month’s worth of her part-time job’s salary, she took off, giving him the ample amount of time he needed with his new bae.

“Damn, this shit looks so goo—” *Knock! Knock!* Darnisha’s attention turned towards the white dressing room door.

“Yesss?” she asked, rolling her eyes and huffing under her breath. She was wondering why in the fuck that young white bitch was interrupting her. A bitch had to make sure this dress was fitting right.

“Open up, it’s me…Deon.”

Darnisha scrunched her face up in surprise. How in the fuck did he manage to get back here? This was a lady’s only dressing room and if he managed to sneak back here, he was going to for sure get both their asses in trouble. She dashed towards the dressing room door and quickly and carefully opened it up, looking him up and down, “Whatchu doin’?!? You gon get us in trouble!”

Standing there, silent, a sexy smile plastered across his face, revealing his perfect white straight teeth, he replied “She’s on break.”

He looked at her for a moment and didn't say anything else. He just gave her this strange look, actually more like a look of seduction. Staring deep into his tantalizing eyes, she was drawn in and she knew exactly what he wanted. She wanted it too truth be told. Then out of nowhere he spun on his feet started walking away from her. Fuck! She thought she'd squandered the perfect opportunity. She couldn't lose this nigga. She knew exactly what he was on. Just in her panties and bra, she lunged out of the room and quickly reached forward and grabbed his wrist. He turned around and looked her up and down. "You ready?"

"Yeah, I'm ready!"

Pulling him back into the dressing room, she quickly checked over his shoulder just to make sure she didn't see anyone coming. Once she closed the door, without hesitation Deon was all over her, kissing her and gently tugging at her panties, trying to pull them down her thick thighs.

"Wait, wait…" she whispered in between heated breaths. "Are you sure you wanna do this?"

Deon continued kissing her, and when he said "fuck yeah," his seductive confirmation instantly melted the walls inside her gooey pink pussy. "I wanted you the very moment my eyes enslaved themselves to your glow."

Hearing him utter those words was all she needed to get shit crackin'. She was about to pop her pussy on a boss CEO nigga, head of one of the top record labels in Miami! Oh hell yeah! Darnisha was about to give him the ride of his fucking life.

The two made it near the small seat in the corner of the dressing room. Deon sat down on the bench and pulled her now soaked panties down. Darnisha was more than ready to straddle him and put that dick up inside her right then and there. Once he got her pussy juice drenched panties from around her partly ashy ankles, he grabbed her and landed his face right in between her yellow thighs.

Deon stuck his brown button nose straight in her pussy and the way he was rubbing his nose in between her pulsating clit and her creamy lips, Darnisha knew her coochie smelled like fresh out the oven apple pie with a scoop of vanilla cream and a dash of cinnamon and nutmeg. The more he rubbed his nose in it, the juicier her pussy got. Finally, when he slipped his tongue in, he parted her thick pussy lips and now she was ready to cum and squirt all over his smooth face. Deon's licks were slow and steady, like he had all the time in the world, but in reality, more like ten minutes. Darnisha grabbed the back of his head, forcing his tongue deeper inside of her gooey pink valley flowing with an endless river of viscous pussy juice.

"Shit, nigga! Fuck, you are eatin' this pussy really fuckin' good!"

She wanted to yell and scream her soul out, but she had to control her urge. Doing her best to contain the uncontrollable orgasm rumbling through her body, she bit her lip and closed her eyes.

He laughed as he devoured her dripping pussy, sending vibrations throughout her body. She couldn't hold it any longer. Her legs went numb and her knees buckled under her as she released her creamy Krispy Kreme-like pussy glaze all over his face. When she had nothing left to squirt, she collapsed against one of the walls and tried to slide down to rest. But Deon wasn't having it.

He stood up, unbuckled his pants and pulled them down along with his boxers in one swift motion. He sat back down on the bench, then grabbed Darnisha's waist and spread her legs. He then wiggled his beautiful eleven-inch shaft across her bulging, throbbing clit and without hesitation, he slid right into that monkey, her walls conforming instantly to his thudding girth. Darnisha was so mesmerized by his dick. Her eyes stood in awe, worshipping just how gorgeous and immaculate it looked – it was like a piece of expensive Picasso art. It was so long, dark, evenly colored and thick. With not too many veins, it was the type of dick she'd long dreamed of. Her trifling ass immediately fell in love. Tre's dick now didn't have shit on Deon's. Nor did he obviously have his money, clout and power.

Darnisha had her fair share of big dicks in her life, but this dick in particular was doing something to her soul. His shit was like TD Jakes, putting the Holy Ghost on that pussy. And with the way her pussy was smackin' and talkin', you would've thought them lips were speaking in tongues. Eih Shondo Kolo Doko Sah. The mixture of pain and bliss emanated up and down Darnisha's spine and legs. With her eyes rolling back to the whites like she was seizing the fuck up, she relaxed and kept sliding up and down. Her pussy opened up even more, letting Deon's dick explore every nook and cranny of that coochie. As he kept drilling in and out of her, Darnisha looked down and saw her nookie cream lathering his dick like it was going through a car wash. Darnisha kept cumming back to back as Deon pushed deeper and deeper inside of her. He was hitting this spot that up until now she never knew even existed. Look at God.

Seconds later, as he ramped up his pumps, he quickly jumped up, picking Darnisha up in one strong, rapid motion and leaned her bare back against the dressing room wall. His even more hard dick was sliding in and out of her, pumping her with lustful fury, touching the back of her uterus. The dick was so good, she was getting nauseous. With sweat forming at his brow, he leaned in and the two kissed. Their tongues locked together like rope around a slave's neck. As their sweaty foreheads touched, beads of our sweat dripped down onto her chest.

She looked deep in his brown eyes and all I could see were dollar signs. Boss Bitch Come Up Plan was no longer a blueprint. This shit was in full implementation mode, and by the way her pussy was talkin', it seemed like the plan was complete. This was going be the start of something very fucking amazing. All she could now see was the boss bitch crown being placed on top of her head, and her and her new King were going to rule all of Miami. Deon then slid out of her, gripped his dick and pushed her down to the ground so she could be prepared to get blasted with his thick nut.

"Ahhh! Ahhhhh! Ah. Ahhh. Ahhh!" He moaned as he shot his cum into her mouth. He coated her tongue with the thickest layer of nut she'd ever tasted. Some even made it to the corners of her mouth. Darnisha swallowed and popped her lips. That nut tasted like crème brulee. His shaft, still oozing some nut leftovers, jumped in exhilaration. Without warning, Darnisha grabbed his shaft and stuffed the dick down her throat, trying her best to milk out another nut from this rich boss nigga.

"Ahhhhhhh," He moaned as she gulped his meat down her throat. She let her tonsils massage his mushroom tip. She pulled his dick out of her mouth and licked his hole. Deon began to face fuck her hard. She coated his dick with her bubbly saliva and viciously stroked him fast as he pumped in and out of her mouth.

"FUUUCK!" He gasped. There it was. A second nut. Not as heavy and thick as the first. But this would suffice. Lo and behold, she now knew she was going to be Mrs. Darnisha Washington.

Chapter Forty-Five

1 PM…After straight, concentrated road "business" trip, Gemini and the guys arrived in Stone Mountain, Georgia. More than ready and amped the fuck up to find that fuck nigga and hoe ass bitch responsible for Tasia and Tahmir's death, the three men plopped themselves out the Expedition and marched with brazen purpose towards check-in counter inside the Holiday Inn's lobby.

Gemini approached a short, chubby young black woman with blonde microbraids and no fucking edges behind the counter. Not realizing three drug cartel enforcers, armed and fucking dangerous, were standing at the counter, she smacked on a bag of hot flamin' Cheetos, giggling while she stared down at her phone. Gemini cleared his throat, "Excuse me, Miss. Have you seen a man and a woman – a black couple that is. The guy was kind of tall, looked kind of like Idris Elba and the bitch looked like KeKe Wyatt?" Gemini asked, TeKashi and Fat Trel off to the side looking around, scanning to see if any hotel guests or patrons were going to interrupt the quick interrogation.

"Ehh, I'm sorry sir, but I can't give out personal information like that. We have a very strict secu—"

Click! Gemini brandished the Glock with the silencer attached at the end, pointing directly at the non-cooperative girl. "Listen young bitch, don't make this more difficult than what it needs to be. Where the fuck is he?"

The young black girl suddenly scrambled, easily remembering Tre's name and looked him up in her reservation system trying to get his room number. "Room 1501 – 5th level," the girl mumbled and trembled, her eyes attached to the gun.

"Did he ever check out?"

"No."

"Did you ever see them come out of the room yet?"

"No sir. Actually I saw the female. She had her hair cut and she dyed it red. She looked like Rihanna."

Gemini looked at Fat Trel and then glanced back at Ms. No Edges. "Fuck," he growled.

"What time?"

"Around 9…"

"But not the guy?"

"No…"

"Make me a room key."

Ms. No Edges within seconds made a copy hotel room key and slid it to Gemini.

"Thanks…" Gemini then pulled out a stack of cash and threw it at her. "Go take a break. NOW!" Ms. No Edges shot up from her seat and dashed out the lobby like she'd just got a call from her bestie telling her she caught her no good baby daddy fucking some random bitch.

Gemini, TeKashi and Fat Trel marched towards the elevators and made their way to the fifth level to go pay their "guest" a visit. Once they got to the room, all three men pulled out their guns, ready to kill Tre. Gemini slid the card into the door key slot. All three lights beamed green.

"One…Two…Three." The Brick Squad mafia crew stormed the room, guns pointed at the bed, but once Gemini's eyes landed on Tre's motionless maimed the fuck up bloodied body rotting in the middle of the bed, his face scrunched up in surprise.

"OH FUCK! SHE KILLED HIM! FUCK! FUCK! FUCK!" Gemini pounced his fist against an adjacent wall. TeKashi and Fat Trel, standing there astonished, quickly covered their mouth and nostrils to stop the rotting flesh smell from invading their noses. The smell didn't bother Gemini though. He'd smelled a fair share of rotting corpses in his heyday.

"We gotta bounce. Let's go before they think we did this shit! FUCK!"

Once the three hittas made their way downstairs, back into the lobby, and out the front entrance of the hotel, Gemini saw Ms. No Edges sitting on a side bench, quivering, smoking a cigarette, fumbling on her phone. Gemini then lunged at her, whipped out his Glock and slammed it to the side of her head.

"AHHH! AHHHHHHH! AHHH!" She cried, dropping her half-smoked Newport.

Gemini muzzled her mouth with his palm, "Bitch shut the fuck up. Now this is what you're gonna do. You're gonna go back to your desk and tell room service to go check up on room 1501. Once that Mexican bitch goes crazy, crying Ay Mio Dios and shit, you're gonna call 911. Then you're gonna go in there and destroy the security video tapes. When the police ask who did it, you're gonna tell him it was the red bitch he was with. She held you up at gunpoint and took the tapes. Got it?"

"Got it…" she stuttered, tears and sweat coming down her chubby

face and down to the corners of her mouth, still covered in red Cheeto crumb crust.

"Give me your wallet and phone…"

"But I ne—"

POW! Gemini shot a warning shot near her face. Realizing her life was hanging in his hands, she handed him her the cheap ass pocketbook she got from Forever 21 and her cracked iPhone 6. He unzipped the purse, pulled out her wallet and then looked at her ID. "You'll probably get fired. But I'll be sending you a check in the mail at this address. You stay there?"

"Yeah…"

"Good, be on the look out in three business days," Gemini looked at the ID again. "…Ms. Shantayvia Wiggins… And stop eating those damn hot flamin' fries and lose some damn weight."

Chapter Forty-Six

After Darnisha and Deon got done fucking the shit out of each other in the Saks Fifth Avenue's dressing room, they made their way back to his condo where she parked her car, dropped off her bags and suitcases. Once she took a shower and changed into her outfit of the night, the freshly new couple made their way to McCormick and Schmick's

The clinking of champagne glasses, silverware and china resonated throughout the dimly lit and slightly busy high-end seafood restaurant. "So, tell me more about yourself? I know I can go on about myself, but you've yet to tell me more about you?" Deon asked, producing the biggest grin on his face.

Darnisha sipped from her wine glass and chuckled, slightly lowering her head, not giving Deon any eye contact. She had to quickly come up with a lie. "Well, I'm from Chicago. I work in the banking industry," she lied. Well, not really a lie if you count her experience being a credit card scammer and a bank fraudster.

"Oh word? What bank do you work for and what do you do?"

"I work for Chase…I'm a Vice President there." The lies were rolling of her cum-covered tongue like it was water.

"Damn…So you must got a MBA?"

"Ehh, nah. I just got an associate's…" Bitch barely made it out of high school.

"Man, that's crazy. How'd you pull that off?" Deon sipped from his chilled glass of whiskey.

Darnisha quickly tried to come up with another story, but luckily, he had to stop and excuse himself to the bathroom. Darnisha took a huge breath and exhaled. Whoo! Gawwdamn! A bitch got out that jam. Hopefully when he came back, he'd change the topic of the conversation she hoped. She quickly thought of some other shit they could discuss. And now knowing she was gonna try to make this nigga her hubby, deep in the back of her small hood nigga noggin, she had to assemble a believable story about her whole entire life.

Moments later, out the corner of her eye, she saw Deon make his way back over to the table. But before arriving, he stopped at the bar

and talked to the bartender for a few moments. He dapped up with the bartender and then waltzed back over to the table and sat down. “Sorry about that. Man, that’s my guy, Frank. I ain’t seen him in a minute. Dude is one of the best bartenders in South Florida.”

“Oh word?” Darnisha faked her excitement.

“Yeah, boy can make a damn drank!” Deon laughed, mocking a deep southern black man’s accent.

Darnisha fake chuckled. She was slowly thinking Deon kind of had a corny sense of humor, but she didn’t mind. That corny ass humor came with some good dick and bread. He could tell all the corny jokes he wanted.

Seconds later, Frank the bartender waltzed over to their table. “Mr. Washington, I think you might enjoy this cocktail. It’s our specialty Long Island Tea. The drink is made out of imported spiced tea leaves from Morocco, Yamazaki Rum, Watenshi Gin, Sloi Elit Vodka, our house made triple sec, a dash of lemon and some secret house ingredients.”

“Sounds delicious. Thank you, sir. We’ll let you know what we think,” Deon said. Frank sat two tall glasses down on the table in front of Darnisha and Deon. Frank smiled at Deon, “Good seein’ you again man, hit me up some time…”

“Gotcha!” Deon exclaimed.

Not wanting to continue with the line of questioning making her uncomfortable earlier, Darnisha quickly sipped on the drink. But within three sips, she was already feeling tipsy. This shit wasn’t the typical Hennessy or Vodka-induced buzz she was accustomed to when she’d get down with her bitches back in the Chi. With this drink she was sipping on, it felt like she was tripping on some acid or magical mushrooms. She immediately knew right then and there that there was a huge difference between $20 and $20,000 worth of liquor.

Deon, however, just kept steadily sipping his drink as if it was customary for him to drink cocktails worth more than some people’s yearly salaries. After taking a few more sips herself, she could feel herself become very relaxed and woozy. This shit was hitting her hard. Very hard.

“So, you married? Got kids?” Deon asked.

Darnisha kind of scrunched her face up, “No??”

“You ain’t gotta lie, Craig. You ain’t gotta lie…Nah, I’m just fuckin’ with you.”

Darnisha kind of her shook her head, perplexed why’d he ask that question out of nowhere. She wondered to herself why he’d even go there considering she just threw some bomb ass pussy on him not too long ago. What respectable married woman with kids would do that? The more she thought about it in her light drunken stupor, the more

she probably thought Deon was kind of playing her. Did he think she was a whore and she was just lying all along? Paranoia and anxiety began to grow within her and she felt somewhat uncomfortable being at the dinner table with him now. GIRL SHUT THE FUCK UP AND GET BACK TO THE PLAN. Her inner Boss Bitch Queen B spirit screamed in her head, instantly snapping her out of her anxiety and suspicion. Why did she suddenly find herself going down that rabbit hole anyways? She had no clue.

"Anyways…Do you have kids?" She smilingly asked.

"Of course…Two be exact. Two twin boys. Marcus and Markell."

The second she heard the word "twin" come out her mouth, it was almost instinctual for her to respond and say she had twins, but she had to quickly stop herself dead in her thought. She didn't have kids. She was single, and no babies had yet swam down her tight pink coochie canal. A lie told often becomes truth.

"Oh wow, that sounds like fun…"

"Yeah, they are. They're both in college. Juniors. Both actually are home now on break. They're staying with their mama. Here in Orlando actually."

"You must be proud of them…"

"Hell yeah. Both are gonna end up working for me at the record label. I'm grooming them to take over the empire. Keep all the money in the family. That's what us black folks supposed to do."

Deon went on and on, talking about business and money, and how eventually he wanted to get into the movie business. The more he kept talking, the more Darnisha's pussy got wet just hearing the cha-ching coming out of his sexy lips. About a good ten minutes later, the waiter approached their table, "Are we ready for appetizers?" the young Latina waitress asked. She continued, "I would recommend the Chef's special. It's Lobster bisque prepared with goat ricotta. It's topped with a medley of olives and croutons."

"Actually, let's go with the maple bacon wrapped shrimp." Deon already knew what to order

"Perfect, I will return in a few with your appetizer and then will you all be ready to order the main course?"

"Yes, thank you."

Time passed. The appetizers and eventually their dinner came. The two continued to talk about life and what not until the check came. Obviously Deon paid because they racked up a bill close to $1,000. Darnisha could've paid, but of course it would've looked a bit odd having a woman slam nearly $1,000 of cash onto the table. Darnisha had no credit cards, let alone a bank account in her name. The cash she had was all the money she had left. If someone were to steal that money, or something crazy happened, like it went up in flames in a

fire, she'd be fucked…possibly for the rest of her life.

"Thank you Mr. Washington," said the waiter, pleased with the generous tip Deon left her. Deon rose to get Darnisha's seat. Once she was up, the couple made their way out of the restaurant.

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Zooming down the busy city expressway, Darnisha was just so stunned her life went through this complete 180. Within a month, she'd accomplished so much. She got out the projects. She got rid of Tasia's goodie goodie two shoes black fat ass. She now had a drop top Maserati. Close to half a mill of cash to her own. More cash she'd ever dreamed of. She avoided going to jail. But then she pondered about her own two children – well, whatever happens to them, it is what it is she thought. This was her life now. Her new reality. This wasn't happenstance. This was her fate. Her divine destiny. God wanted this. All those things had to happen for a reason. Granted, a lot of shit came along the way and tested her faith, but she withstood and fought the devil off her back.

Leaning back in the posh leather seat of Deon's Maybach, she turned her head and looked over at him, "Thank you so much for dinner. I really enjoyed it. What a good way to end the night," she beamed.

"End the night? We just gettin' the party started!" he responded.

"Hahah! What you mean? We gotta hit the road in the morning!"

"Girl, don't worry about all that. You with me now. We're gonna fly to Miami. Fuck that drivin' shit."

Darnisha exhaled, "Thank God…I was hoping you'd say that!"

He looked over at her and smiled, "I want you to go to this industry event with me. Yeah, it's a bit late, but hey, if you gonna be with me, that's just how this shit works. The night doesn't end till 11 AM. That's how we get down in 3-0-5."

"Whatever, baby. I'm game," she smiled.

"I know…" He produced the biggest grin on his face and put his eyes back on the road.

Chapter Forty-Seven

45 minutes passed. It was nearly 12 AM. After driving through what seemed like an endless forest, the couple pulled up to a gate guarded by three big, burly security guards holding rifles. Deon rolled down the window and smiled. “Mr. Washington! Good to see you again!” One of the security guards reached in to shake Deon’s hand.

“Wassup Joe. You still hittin’ them weights?”

“Shit, you know it…Anyways, ya’ll have a good time…” The black gate opened, and Deon drove through, the gates closing right behind him. He continued pacing the luxury sedan down this cobblestone road lined with eight foot tall trees creating fortress-like walls on its sides. A minute later, the Maybach pulled up to the biggest fucking mansion Darnisha had ever seen before in her entire life. That shit looked like three Buckingham Palaces put together. Tiki torches were lit across the vast lawn surrounding a big white tent. Darnisha peered through the tint and saw what looked like hundreds of people dancing away to the echoing, bass heavy sound of hip hop.

Two more security guards approached the Maybach and opened both Darnisha and Deon’s doors. “What’s up, fellas?” As soon as the two security guards realized it was Deon Washington, CEO of Teflon Don Entertainment, they grinned, “Mr. Washington! Right on time. Party wouldn’t start without you.”

“I bet!” Deon responded.

One of the security guards motioned for him to stretch his arms out, “Standard protocol, sir…” Both guards patted him down and pulled a pistol off his waist, examined it, then slid it back into its place.

“We good?” Deon asked.

“Of course…” They both nodded their heads. Once they examined and lightly patted down Darnisha, they escorted them to the vast, gaudy gothic entrance of the mansion. Deon handed one of the guards the key to the Maybach so they could park it in a secured, covered garage.

Once Deon and Darnisha got directly in front of the door, Deon knocked three times. Within a second, a butler opened the door, and

instantly classical music, not the Hip Hop blaring outside, echoed throughout the castle-like mansion. Outside Darnisha noticed that most of the party goers were younger and colored. But inside, as she scanned the area, all she saw were older white men and a few old white bitches. Another butler, some old James Earl Jones-lookin' ass nigga, holding a golden platter of hors d'oeuvres, walked around giving these obviously rich ass white crackas appetizers. Shit Darnisha never seen before. Seconds later, James Earl Jones approached Deon and Darnisha, the only black people in the room, with the same gold platter in his hand. He displayed the raw fish on top of crackers with some kind of sauce just to the left.

Deon looked at Darnisha, "You ever had one of these before?" he asked as he scooped one off the platter. "This shit is not half bad," he said, pushing it towards Darnisha's mouth. "Take a bite."

"Nah, I'm good." Darnisha said, a tad intimidated.

Suddenly Deon flipped the script, instantly showing another side to himself. He clutched Darnisha to his side, gripping her with pain, making her quickly realize he was being more than serious now. "Don't embarrass me. We are out here with the elite," he said with a stern whisper, "not in the fuckin' hood. Taste this shit and understand where the fuck you are at."

Darnisha gulped. Oh fuck. This nigga Deon was on some Tre shit. Her heart sunk to her stomach, and she had no other choice but to take a bite of the raw fish and crackers, nearly gagging as she forced the dry yet slimy mixture down her throat. "See, what I tell you? Good, huh? Yeah, yeah, yeah I know. Come on. We got some power players to meet."

Without warning he grabbed Darnisha's hand and led her further into the castle as a few white party attendees, dressed in tuxedos and gowns, quickly glanced at her with slight suspicion. She felt so fucking out of place given her ass was wearing that tight fitting backless bodycon while the rest of these bitches looked like they were attending the 1947 Academy Awards.

As the "couple" trekked more and more into what seemed like the main dining area, more waiters, mostly black, walked around with platters of food. This shit felt like it was slavery or Jim Crow all over again to Darnisha. Her eyes quickly scanned a sea of old white men with silver hair sprouting from their pale pinkish scalps while others had heads that looked like vultures. Their eyes fell on Darnisha as soon as the couple found themselves in the center of the room.

"Deon! So glad you can make it!" This old white cracka, who kind of reminded Darnisha of a chubbier version of Donald Trump, just with a redder toupee, approached Deon and Darnisha. Muhfucka looked like he died and went to heaven once his eyes registered

Darnisha's accentuated curves popping through the dress.

"Mr. Gerber! I want you to meet someone," Deon said, this time pulling Darnisha closer and in front of him like she was a piece of meat. "This is Darnisha. Darnisha, this is Mr. Gerber. He's the Chairman and CEO of Blitz Capital. He's the rainmaker. Without this man, Teflon Don wouldn't exist!"

"Ohhh, stop it Deon…I'm flattered. Darnisha, nice to meet you. And don't call me Mr. Gerber. My name is Ron," The cracka said extending his hand to shake Darnisha's. She looked down at his chubby, wrinkled hand covered in brown spots and gray hair.

She nervously reached out and shook Mr. Gerber's hand. "Nice to meet you as well."

"She's a looker, ay!" Mr. Gerber smiled, exposing his rotten green teeth. Muhfucka looked like he brushed his teeth in baby shit. He licked his thin, pink lips and kept smiling. His smirk dripped with perversion

Deon snickered. "Yeah, she's a good catch."

Darnisha stood there, silent, not really flattered. The longer she stood there, the more awkward she felt. She kept staring at Mr. Gerber knowing his winkled face held secrets that nobody would ever know, and she couldn't look him in the eyes for longer than a few seconds before she had to turn away.

"Anyways, ya'll make yourself comfortable. Party's just gettin' started," Mr. Gerber smiled once more and then walked off.

Deon then took Darnisha by the hand and led her down a hallway with velvet carpet and expensive Victorian paintings lining the walls. "Deon, where are we going?" Darnisha asked with concern buried in her tone. But he didn't bother responding. He just looked her up and down and gave her this look that read, 'bitch stop asking me questions.' Eventually he stopped in front of what seemed like a bedroom door. Once pushed it open, it was a massive theater-like living room. No one was present, obviously except Darnisha and Deon. As they continued walking through the vast, dark living room in silence, he approached yet another door. He opened it, and there was a staircase illuminated by a tiny red bulb leading down into darkness. *Don't go. Don't go. Don't go Bitch. Run. Run. Run. Don't go bitch. Get yo ass out of there.* Darnisha's intuition was throwing up all types of big ass red flags, warning her something was about to happen.

"Umm, Deon...Nah, I don't know about all this. I just wanna go home." Deon suddenly gripped Darnisha by her throat and looked her deep in her widened, fearful eyes. The gaze he produced immediately let her know she wasn't dealing with just a CEO of a record label, but a psychopath who was on some other shit – shit she had no comprehension of. "Stop overreacting…" he grumbled.

Slipping into complete silence, her natural impulse wanted her to run and fend for her life, but she was out in the middle fucking nowhere surrounded by rich white people who she knew wouldn't even give a fuck about her and her cries for help.

Without saying a word, the two walked down the staircase, eventually making their way to the door of yet another room. Deon knocked on the door, but this knock was more like a secret password to gain access. Seconds later, a topless white girl with long, curly brunette hair opened the door. Darnisha gasped, and her eyes amplified with fear as she and Deon walked into a massive lair reminiscent of a strip club.

The young white stripper bitch immediately closed and locked the door, and now all Darnisha saw were scores of old, wrinkled, naked white men wearing Mardi Gras beads around their necks, walking around, stroking their hard pink dicks. A few of them were huddled in circles, jerking off as some took turns getting their dicks sucked by strippers. Darnisha looked over in another corner and saw another old white man getting fucked in the ass by this completely naked nigga who looked like Tyrese's twin. As the black nigga rammed in and out of the old white man's ass, that cracka was groaning and yelling, "FUCK ME HARDER! FUCK ME HARDER DADDY! GIVE ME THAT BIG BLACK NIGGER COCK!"

Darnisha clutched her mouth in angst and surprise. What in the fuck was going on!!? Was this some sort of Illuminati party or some shit? Her heart began thumping at a million beats per minute seeing all the perverse acts go down. She looked around in another corner and saw a table that had mounds of cocaine resting on top of it. A few people would occasionally saunter over to the table and just throw their heads into the mound and laugh.

Seconds later, a redheaded white bitch with nothing on but a tiny gold thong walked up to Deon and Darnisha, handing Deon a drink. "Thanks," Deon replied and then handed the drink to Darnisha.

"I'm good. Like for real. I can't drink no more."

"Just drink," Deon growled as he clutched and gripped her harder, "You're going to need it so you can relax."

On the inside she was dying and crying. All she wanted to do was run, go back to his condo, get her shit and dip the fuck off, but here she was trapped with this obviously sociopath narcissistic lunatic who was forcing her to join in this massive drug crazed sex party.

He gently handed her the Martini, and she took it from his hand. She slowly sipped the drink, but the second he realized she was taking her time, he shoved the glass down her mouth, forcing her to quickly gulp the funny tasting drink. Out the corner of Darnisha's eye, another bitch, this time a older looking brown skinned hoe with a neon orange

bob, wearing nothing but a gold thong, waltzed up to Deon and Darnisha. “Sup, Quita,“ Deon smiled as he rubbed his hands together, looking at one of the two black satin bags she was holding in her hands. “Is it all there?” he asked.

“Yup. All of it.”

“Good…” Deon opened the sack. There was nothing but fresh stacks and bundles of cash…All rare, freshly minted $10,000 bills. It was at least $4 million in the bag.

“Deon, please, just tell me what the fuck is this shit?” Darnisha, now feeling super-woozy, beseeched as she kneeled down and put the glass on the ground. “What the fuck do you have me into?” Darnisha couldn’t resist but to ask questions. She had to. Her safety was on the motherfuckin’ line. She didn’t sign up for this crazy shit, and she’d be damned if Deon was about to force her to join in the orgy.

Quita looked at Darnisha up and down with complete disgust, as if she didn’t have the right to ask questions. Then she let out this laugh, her body language suggesting, ‘bitch you just fucked up.'

“Deon??! Answer me, nigga!” Of course he didn’t respond. He just stood there, looking like he was trying to collect his thoughts as he held his chin in his right hand.

SLAP! Without hesitation he back handed Darnisha, and she flew down to the ground. A few onlookers, still getting their nasty fuck on, looked their way but didn’t give a fuck and returned back to their sinning. Feeling increasingly nauseous, slow and heavy from the drink, Darnisha tried to gather herself as she stood up from the massive pimp slap. She tried to get up and run away, but before she could make it far, suddenly she felt a yank on her arm, “Bitch, have you lost your mind? You really think I’ma let you disrespect me in front of all this money?”

“What is going on, Deon?” Darnisha asked with teary, hazy, reddened eyes, “What is this shit?”

“Bitch, you don’t think I know all about you? Your name ain’t no damn Darnisha. I know a hoe when I see one. Yeah, I ran those plates on that Maserati. You think I’m some simple ass nigga?”

“I don’t kno—” SLAP! Deon went across her face again. “Just shut the fuck up and get ready to work…BELINDA.”

Holding her face, Darnisha was so confused yet shocked. How’d he even know that was the fake name Tre gave her? Putting two and two together, she quickly realized Tre probably used the fake identities to register the plates on the Maserati. Had to be.

“How did you know that’s my name?” Darnisha asked as she wiped her nose clear of blood.

“Bitch, I’m the CEO of one of the biggest record labels in the world. You don’t think I got it like that? Belinda Bishop? Bitch, in two

minutes, I was able to pull your rap sheet. You a vet ass hoe from the South Side. Been suckin' dicks since the age of 12. And you wanted back in Chicago too for child sex trafficking…"

"Wait, what? Fuck?" Darnisha shook her head no. O-M-G. Tre was smart enough to use the identity of a wanted bitch. Nigga probably did that deliberately in case Darnisha tried to one up his ass.

"Bitch, don't act like you ain't know. Now this is what we gon do. Since yo ass put on a show for me, you gon put a show on for my clients. These rich white muhfuckas just paid me close to $5 million to secure a lil Beyonce lookin-ass bitch like yourself. You gon go in the middle of that stage over there and whatever those muhfuckas want, you gon give it to them, you understand me bitch?"

"Wh-whwhy? Why are you doin' this to me?" Darnisha stammered as tears swelled in her eyes.

He shrugged his shoulders, "You should've been honest with me for the get go. I was gonna let your ass walk but you couldn't stop lyin'. Thanks for the come up. You just helped me finance my new movie production venture. Quita, take care of this lyin' ass garbage ass bitch."

"No, I c-cc-can't do this," Darnisha continued to beg and cry. Suddenly Deon pulled out his pistol and jammed it under her chin, ready to blow her brains out of her thick, non-compliant skull. "Bitch, you must not know I used to body niggas for a livin', and I'm not afraid of bodying one right now. Now stop with the fuckery and go get your fuck on. And before you get on stage, do a set of kegels or somethin'. Try to tighten that pussy up. Them walls felt like they went through category five hurricane." Deon laughed and walked off, leaving his "assistant" Quita to go prepare "Belinda" for the million dollar Illuminati fuckfest.

"Deon, please," she cried and begged him as he disappeared off into the crowd, observing some random white slut get her lil fuzzy blonde pussy ripped the fuck up by a gang of white muhfuckas that looked like George Bush. The daddy and the son.

"Bitch, cut the games. Let's get this shit started," Quita barked in her obvious over bite. "Follow me, heaux."

Quita, who looked like she was ready to beat Darnisha's ass if she made the wrong move, grabbed the so-called Beyonce look alike nigga bitch by the hand and pulled her into a side closet.

Quita, holding the second black satin bag, reached into it and pulled out a gold thong and a bottle of prescription pills. "Here, pop two of these. It'll help get that ass open. Listen, 'cuz I'ma be real witchu, you 'bout to have all kinds of dicks, fists and dildos up in every fucking hole of yo body bitch, so go ahead and take four if you ain't did anal befo!"

Darnisha lowered and shook her head, tears from her eyes fell down to the ground. She was in utter fucking disbelief. Quita huffed and rolled her eyes. She then shoved the bottle of pills into Darnisha's chest and sighed. "Look bitch, I'm just tryin' to help you out, aight? You can either take these pills or live through the shit but trust me, you ain't gonna remember dis shit if you take these muhfuckin' pills. I did it sober once and I still got muhfuckin' nightmares 'til this day. And that shit was three years ago."

KNOCK! KNOCK! KNOCK! "Ya'll hurry the fuck up! These geriatric crackas finna be sleep any moment!" Deon growled, banging on the door.

Darnisha opened the bottle, tapped four pills into her hand. "You got some water?" "Yeah, bitch, I got some water. Here!" Quita handed Darnisha a small bottle of water. Once she downed the benzos, which were anti-anxiety meds giving to schizophrenics, Darnisha cautiously yet quickly did her best to slip out of the bodycon. She had a thong on herself. She slipped it off, exposing her bald pussy print. Quita looked down at her coochie, "Shit, if you ask me, you got a little pretty pussy," Quita laughed.

Darnisha wasn't flattered at all by the comment. Not only because she was now gonna be forced to have sex with a bunch of unknown white men against her will, but Quita looked like Propecia the crackhead with a orange bob wig on top of her head. The bitch looked so hard in the face, you would've thought she was half human, half roach.

Already dizzy from the drink she had earlier, once the pills began to run through her blood, Darnisha wobbled out of the room with Quita trailing her. Deon, standing there, looked her up and down, making sure his "catch" was presentable to his clients. "Is you ready bitch?" Deon asked with his eyes turned to serious slits. This nigga no longer sounded like a sophisticated, well-educated CEO. He sounded like the typical street niggas she was used to dealing with back in ChiRaq.

Deon, who pretty much turned himself into a pimp for the night, escorted his main bitch to the center stage, ready to let his clients get their wrinkled clammy hands on her flesh. Once she got up on stage, next thing you know Yo Gotti's "Rake It Up" came on. Another redheaded white bitch jumped on stage and started dancing to the beat, doing her best to motivate Darnisha to do the same. The white girl dipped and then twerked. Darnisha followed suit. As she looked out into the sea of naked white men, Deon, the only dude who was dressed, looked at her with the most venomous stare. A stare that said, 'bitch if you don't pop that pussy to the best of your abilities, your ass will be on the milk carton come next week'.

Seconds later, another stripper bitch jumped on the stage, but in her hand was a big tube of lube and a five foot pink two sided dildo that was thicker than a snake at a Zoo.

The girl pranced up to Darnisha and tugged her gold thin thong down her thighs and off her ankles. “Get on yo knees, bitch,” she commanded. Now on her knees with her ass tooted up in the air, Darnisha felt the cold lube get lathered all around her asshole and pussy meat.

The lube bitch then did the same to the other hoe on stage, prepping her ass. “Ahhh!” Darnisha bit her lip and tried to fight off the sudden, jolting pain of having the dildo rammed up her ass. Trying to grab any anything to subdue the pain tearing apart her delicate rectum, she closed her eyes and just imagined being back in Chicago with Jashaun and Jasmine, watching a show on Netflix. Then it hit her – had she not been such a fuck up of a mother and a low life scamming bitch trying to make a quick dollar, she wouldn’t be in this shitty predicament. No pun intended.

The other bitch, who had the dildo rammed up her ass though was enjoying the shit out of the experience. She pounced harder on the dildo, sending more pressure into Darnisha’s side. Then the young hoe amped on the dildo pumping. The men in the crowd were going batshit crazy seeing splash of sweat, ass juice and lube fly all over the place.

Next thing you know, Quita hopped on stage and commanded the sluts to face each other, dildos still in their plowed out sore asses. “Put a smile on yo face, bitch!” Quita yelled at Darnisha. Quita’s shout mixed in with the sea of old white men’s roaring and growling with the bass heavy music still blaring in the background. Doing as she was commanded, the girls continued at it. Then Quita, who was acting like the MC for the show, took the performance to another level. “Ya’ll ready boys?”

“YEAAAAAHHHH!”

“HAVE AT IT!” Suddenly a stampede of men from the crowd rushed and flooded the stage, circling the girls like a pack of wolves. Darnisha went in out of consciousness, ready to black out from the pain of being raped in the ass plus the pills running in her system. All she saw now were glimpses of old white men, sweating and salivating. The men were stroking and flapping their hairy pink dicks. Some men were tugging back the wrinkled foreskin on their uncircumcised dicks, exposing their engorged pink mushroom tips oozing precum.

“Yeah, black nigger bitch, spready those pussy lips for me, ay!” The men were shouting, growling and screaming all sorts of nasty and derogatory sexual and racial epithets while they groped Darnisha. Then a few them leaned in closer and stuffed their dicks in her mouth.

A few men managed to poke her ears and eyes. Blanking in and out of consciousness, she kept seeing flashes of her children. Then she saw flashes of Tahmir and Tasia, and slowly but surely she was starting to regret everything she did to them. Now that she found herself being the victim of sexual assault and rape, she realized karma wasn't a bitch – it was the sickle of God's justice coming to tear her away from her mischievous pipe dream, forcing her to awaken and experience the dark reality she put so many people through, including her own niece.

As the crowd of white men continued to plow in and out of all the orifices and holes in her body, a few men did the unthinkable. They urinated all over body, laughing uncontrollably as she tried to fight and fan away the warm yellow waterfalls splashing her in the face.

"IS YOU READY BITCH!?!?" Quita barked at another hoe. "Yeah!"

"WATCH OUT FELLAS!" Quita instructed as she broke up the crowd around Darnisha. Another chick ran up on Darnisha, turned around, took her thong down and then spread her ass cheeks open. "AHHHH!" The woman shitted all over Darnisha's face and body. The men laughed as they without hesitation smeared the soft shit all over Darnisha's face. Then another white man, higher than a kite, did the same, spreading his ass open, shitting all over Belinda. As she cried, and wailed in pain and agony, Deon, standing far off in the crowd, was laughing his ass off. "Dumb hoe ass nigga bitch," he muttered as he smoked a blunt.

The seconds of time passing felt like hours, and Darnisha wondered when this shit was going to be over. Finally, the grand act culminated in all the men cumming in a big punch bowl. Once they all took turns jizzing in the bowl, Quita walked over and without warning doused Darnisha in old cracka nut nog. "Merry Christmas, bitch…" Quita chuckled as she forced Darnisha to guzzle down the white and gray jelly-like semen.

Darnisha collapsed on her back, trying her best to breathe. Survive bitch. Survive. Quita hovered over her and threw her towel. "Come on, nah! Go get yo self cleaned up, heaux. You ain't done yet!"

Chapter Forty-Eight

"Waddup, OG?" Deon dapped up with Mr. Floyd, a man Deon once regarded as his mentor and de facto stepdaddy. "Man, shit, chillin'. So, what we got here?"

Deon popped the trunk to his old school box chevy, and both men's eyes stared at Darnisha's completely naked body as she lay blacked the fuck out. Handcuffed with her hands behind her back. Thick tape wrapped around her mouth stuffed with a handkerchief. Her feet bound by thick lynching rope.

"Some bitch tryin' to make her way down to Dade to probably finesse niggas… Caught her ass at a gas station in a Maserati."

"Man, boy, you better be careful. You got a reputation and too much on the stake. You tryna go to prison or some shit?"

"Shit, you know at the end of the day, I'm still a street nigga at heart. I would have not done shit if she didn't have so many damn muhfukin' lies comin' out her throat."

Mr. Floyd, who was at least a good sixty years old, was fiddling with a toothpick he got from the local Golden Corral buffet in his dry mouth. He was a nasty, sheisty, greasy looking ass nigga with the blackest skin on the planet. That Florida sun made his ass so black, he looked blue. Everytime he talked, his gold cap on his front tooth beamed off Deon's sunglasses. Mr. Floyd must've forgot it was 2018 and not 1988 because he had the juiciest jheri curl perm in his hair. You would've thought this nigga was auditioning to do a Soul Glo commercial. Closely examining Darnisha as she lay sound asleep in heroin-induced unconsciousness, Mr. Floyd rubbed his belly and picked his teeth. "How was the pussy?"

"It was aiiight. Had better. She could suck a mean dick though." Deon chuckled.

"Anyways, what you want for her?"

Deon laughed, "Hrrrm. Gas money for drivin' down to this country ass shithole…Let me get $20."

Mr. Floyd, asking no questions, pulled out his gator leather wallet and handed Deon a crispy $20 bill, courtesy of a monthly social security stipend he received on the 15th since he filed for disability

years ago. Then he pulled out a crumbled-up pack of Marlboros, slapped a cigarette in his mouth and lit it up. He creepily ran his thick, callused up fingers along Darnisha's yellow, tatted up thighs. "She look like that bitch married to Jay-Z…What's her name again? Bianca??"

Deon chuckled, "Beyonce…Beyonce, Mr. Floyd."

"Yeah, her ass. Anyways…'Preciate the gift, youngin'. I ain't have some good pusseh since Billie Jean left my ass."

Deon patted Mr. Floyd's back, "Well, here you go…Take it easy on her. We all know how you used to get down back in the day…"

"Ha! You funny, boy… Well, help me get this yella skank in the back of my pick up." The two guys tugged on Darnisha, getting a good grip on her body and then in one pull, dragged her out the trunk and carried her over to Mr. Floyd's Ford F-150.

It was around midnight…Deon and Mr. Floyd were far off in some isolated, secluded swamp in the middle of lower central Florida. After Deon got done pimping Darnisha's lying ass off to those old white perverts back in Orlando, he needed to get rid of her ass. Although he definitely did not need the money, he discovered Darnisha's stash of cash – well over $300,000. Made the shady record label CEO himself think how this trifling Chicago no pussy walls having bitch even got her claws on that much cash.

Since he was an intelligent businessman, and he knew IRS and banking laws like the back of his hand, dumping that much money in his bank account would send off a lot of red flags. He decided he was going to donate the cash some way or some how. Maybe set up some sort of scholarship fund for black college students.

Once Deon and Mr. Floyd got Darnisha in the back of the pick up, resting comfortably Deon walked back to his car and before he hopped in his car to make his way back to Orlando, he blew a kiss in Darnisha's direction. "Sayonara sorry ass hoe."

Mr. Floyd chucked up the engine on his truck, turned up the volume on the radio blaring James Brown's "It's A Man's World" and made his way out the dark and muddy swamp back into the heart of Belle Glade.

Belle Glade, if you don't know, is probably about a good two hours north of Miami, right next to Lake Okeechobee. 'Round these parts weren't beaches, night clubs, mansions, Cubans, Haitians or any other typical flare Miami or South Florida was known for. This shit was the fucking country. As country as it could get. Niggas were pretty much still slaves in these neck of the woods. Belle Glade was a small ass town – no more than 20,000 people lived here, so everyone kinda of knew each other. Riding back into town, Mr. Floyd made it back into his nook of town; a small ass trailer park called "Golden Gate".

Driving through the jagged and murky dirt road leading to his trailer – the biggest on the lot – he came up to his mobile home and parked the truck. He plopped his portly midnight black ass out the truck and made his way around to the back. He pulled the moldy blue tarp off Darnisha, picked her up and slumped her limber body over his broad shoulders. Doing his best to make sure no nosey ass neighbors were snooping in on him, he dashed up the three bricked steps and made his way inside the musty, cigarette smoke smelling home and closed the door. Stormed through the dark, hazy living room, he eventually made his way into his bedroom and threw Darnisha's body onto the bed. He then uncuffed her and then strapped her arms to the rails of the bed using old pants belts. She was stretched out like she was about to get crucified. Mr. Floyd went into his nightstand, pulled out a dull razorblade he'd used to shave his beard and pubes and cut the tape around her mouth off. He then made his way to a corner recliner chair, sat back, kicked his legs up and dozed off to sleep.

~

Darnisha's eyes slowly opened. Hazy and confused, she tried to adjust and focus on her pupils, doing her best to assess where she was at. Damn sure not the inside of Deon's posh luxury penthouse condo. Her eyes immediately fixed onto the sleeping Mr. Floyd as he snored away, a small .45 caliber resting comfortably in his hand.

She looked to her left. She saw a huge painted portrait of a big Bertha lookin' ass bitch hung crooked on the moldy wood panel wall. The painting had to be at least thirty or more years old. Then she quickly looked to her left and peered out the bedroom window. Faint rays of early morning sunlight began to creep in and gently illuminate the bedroom. With Mr. Floyd still snoring away, his sleep apnea jolted him out of his sleep. His jaundiced eyes widened and suddenly he saw his beau was wide awake. He was ready for his morning dose of Bianca's pussy. He smiled, "Mornin'…"

"AHH! AHHHHHHHHH!" Darnisha screamed at the top of her lungs. Mr. Floyd propped up from his old dark blue recliner and lunged at Darnisha and muzzled her, hosting the gun up to her temple. "Bianca…Gal, you betta keep yo muhfuckin' shut before I turn yo ass into a pot roast!". He ran his nose up her neck, smelling her then kissed her neck, planting dry and hot kisses under her chin.

He reached over to his nightstand and grabbed a long black handkerchief. Once he removed his huge callused palm from around her mouth, she tried to scream again, but seconds later, those screams went silent as he wrapped the handkerchief around her mouth. Wanting not a damn sound to be heard from her mouth, he followed

up with some tape he had in the bottom drawer the nightstand.

He scratched his taco meat hair covered flabby chest and then pulled the old, hole-filled, yellow stained wife beater off his torso and threw it to the side. Wearing now only a pair of white Hanes, he slowly slipped them off his dry, swelled up ankles and kicked the Hanes with a trail of skid marks off to the side. Fully naked, he stroked himself to an erection. Darnisha's eye amplified in fear seeing Mr. Floyd's dick swell up with so much blood. Under any other circumstance, if the dick Mr. Floyd had was attached to a boss nigga, Darnisha's chops would be dripping with spittle, ready to have the meat glide down her throat. But this meaty black dick was attached to this unknown, greasy, black, jheri curl having rapist who looked like he hadn't had any pussy in ages. He walked over to his dresser, took the lid off the top of a vat of Vaseline and began to rub the lubricant all over his dick and balls, making sure he had enough to plow right into Darnisha with ease.

Mr. Floyd then trekked back to the bed and crawled in. Darnisha suddenly found the urge to kick and fling her legs, hoping to stave off the rapist and kidnapper but he was able to breakdown her resistance with ease as he inched closer to her, and hovered over her, ready to invade her seemingly non-wet and closed off pussy. Propping all 285 pounds of his blueblack mass on top of Darnisha, he went right inside her, "Ahhh, ahhh, shit!" Mr. Floyd growled as Darnisha cried and screamed, feeling all of Mr. Floyd's flesh wiggle inside her now lubed up cave. By this point, she had no choice but to give in. Mr. Floyd was gon take this pussy whether she liked it or not. As he grumbled and groaned, stroking in and out of her, the headboard of the bed knocked against the wall rapidly like Bell Glade was in the throes of a 9.4 Earthquake. "Ahh! Ahhh! Ahhh!" He wailed, enjoying the $20 sex slave pussy, his hot and cantankerous breath escaping his dry mouth and wide nigga nostrils, venting all down Darnisha's bare chest and neck. As he plowed harder and harder, Darnisha reeled in pain. She was still recovery from last night. Her ass and pussy were still very much sore from being fisted and fucked with all types of dildos and sex toys. Continuing to make deep grunts, obvious signs he was loving every inch of Darnisha's nookie, Mr. Floyd was on the cusp of cumming.

"AHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHH! AHHHHHHH! AHHHHH SHIIIT!" Mr. Floyd suddenly came all up in Darnisha, released all his stored up nut from his baseball shaped balls. Panting hard, sweating, and now his jaundiced eyes looking slightly red, Mr, Floyd slowly propped up and slowly inched out of her cum drenched pussy. He scrunched up his face and his eyes widened like he'd seen a ghost. Suddenly he grabbed his chest and squinted his eyes like he was in the

worse pain of his life. “AHH! AHHH!” Then all of sudden his collapsed down onto Darnisha’, still inside her vanal, his 285-pound frame crushing her.

“MMMMMMMMMM! MMMMMMMMMMMMMMMM!” Darnisha screamed through her muffled mouth. Mr. Floyd was motionless. And as seconds turned into minutes, and Darnisha still screaming at the top of her lungs through her taped up mouth, she knew right then and there Mr. Floyd had a massive heart attack and died….right on top of her. Color Purple style. Except the difference was Darnisha didn’t know how in the FUCK she was going to get this big, dead block of mass of her and escape this unending nightmare.

Chapter Forty-Nine

Back in Chi-town, after another straight twelve hour trip from Atlanta, Gemini and the boys arrived back at base. “Aiight, gang, I’mma hit ya’ll up later, I got some shit to take care of.” Gemini hopped out the black Expedition parked outside Papi’s crib. TeKashi and Trel took off, needing to take care of the rest of some more street hitta business. Once inside the house, Gemini walked into the kitchen where he saw Papi dancing and two stepping to salsa music as he was preparing dinner.

“Ay yo, Papi, I’m back,” Gemini announced his presence and as soon as his voice went into his father ears Papi spun on his feet and lunged at Gemini, “My son!” Giving him the tightest hug possible, Papi planted kisses all up and down his son’s beautiful brown face he worried about for the last day or so. He understood his son needed to go to war, but he couldn’t fathom the possibility of losing another child.

“You guys made it back safe? Did you kill those motherfuckers? Where are they?” Papi questioned, still embracing his son.

Gemini shook and lowered his head, “No, papi…Well, that nigga Tre is dead. That fuckin’ bitch Darnisha killed him and took off. I put the word out to some of the guys down in Florida to be on the look out but nothing came back yet.”

“Fuck, damn…So what are you guys gonna do? What’s the next plan?”

Gemini exhaled and huffed, “Honestly…We should go back into retirement. TeKashi, Trel and the rest of the guys can have this shit. They hittin’ up Murda Munna’s corners as we speak. They finna wipe them off the map. But this war, Papi was lost from the very get go. Tasia is dead. Tahmir is gone. There’s no point. Once I figure out what the hospital did with her body, I’m going back to H-town…”

Papi suddenly turned solemn, “I understand, mi hijo. You’re making the right decision. That street life is for suckers. I’m so glad you’ve decided to move the fuck on. When do you plan on going to the hospital?”

“Actually now…”

“You want me to come?”

“It’s cool, Papi. Just finish cooking so I can come back and eat. I ain’t ate in almost two days.”

“Awww, pobrecito. What I tell you ‘bout that?”

“I know, I know…Anyways, lemme bounce before it gets too late…”

“Llamame y dime que paso, bien?” Papi said call me and tell me what happened in Spanish.

“Bien…”

~

It was around 2PM now, and Gemini slowly traversed through the cold, bright yet grief ridden hospital corridors. Coming back in here for the second time was extremely overpowering. As he heard echoed cries, wails of pain and coughing mixed in with the sound of beeping beside hospital machines, knots twisted his stomach up like an Aunt Annie’s pretzel.

Gemini approached a nurse’s station inside the very same emergency room where Tasia landed herself days ago. “Excuse me, miss…”

An older looking white nurse typing away at a computer looked up, “Yes? How did you get back here, sir? This area is only for patients and relatives of patients.”

“I know, I’m sorry…but if you don’t mind, a couple of days ago, one of my friends died here. Her name was Tasia. I don’t know her last name. But the doctors told me she OD’d on some pills. I think aspirin…” Grief was molded into the features of Gemini’s face.

“I’m so sorry, sir, but I’m not allowed to give out that type of patient information, and like I said you can’t be back here unless you are with an admitted patient. I’m going to have to ask you to leave… Your best bet is to go back to the lobby of the hospital and speak with the registration desk and have them direct you possibly to the morgue.”

“I did that already, they couldn’t find any information on her. They couldn’t find her name in the system. She didn’t have ID on her or anything. She looked about 17-years-old, kind of on the thicker side, dark brown, medium length hair…”

“Sir….I’m going to have to ask you to leave or I am going to have to call the police.”

Gemini lowered his head, “Ok…Have a good day, ma’am,” he muttered. He turned around and slowly walked away from the nurse’s station. As he slowly passed each hospital room, making his way closer and closer to the exit, he contemplated on how all of this shit

was all too surreal, depressingly surreal. His aim was to come to the hospital, figure out what they did with Tasia's body and at least try his best to give his friend a proper burial. It was the right thing to do for a girl who'd gone through so much in her short, seventeen years of life.

The same white doctor who'd broke the devastating news to Gemini days earlier was standing off near one of the hospital rooms, talking to a nurse. "Give him 20 ccs of lorazepam to subdue his heart rate, and then we will—"

Suddenly his eyes turned to investigative slits as he scanned Gemini up and down, and then it hit him. "Sir! SIR!" The doctor barked, instantly grabbing Gemini's attention. Gemini looked at him, and for a split second, the now ex-drug cartel assassin gave the doctor a menacing scowl wondering why he was yelling at him.

Gemini stopped, and then he immediately recognized the doctor. His eyes widened in surprise and now he was ready to ask those very same questions he'd asked the nurse moments ago, but before he could even open his mouth, the doctor lunged at him and grabbed him by his arm, "OH MY GOD! We've been looking all over for you! We just didn't know how to get into contact with anyone or a relative of the girl who you brought in here!"

"Yes! I just spent the las—"

"SHE'S ALIVE!"

Gemini's gloomy eyes grew even wider. "What????" He responded, his voice light and cracking.

"Yes sir! Oh my god! She's alive! It's rare that these things happen, but she's ALIVE! It's a damn miracle. Her heart restarted on its own! She's ALIVE. Come with me!"

"Wait, wait, wait. You said she's alive right?"

"YES! SIR! ALIVE!" The doctor smiled.

Gemini couldn't help it. All of a sudden he clutched his face and his eyes squinted as a million tears flooded his face and cheeks. The doctor, filled with so much empathy, reached in and embraced Gemini, "Yes, man, she's alive," he affirmed, a few tears running down his face as well. "She had to have a kidney and liver transplant, and we still have her in a medically induced coma! Come with me!"

~

Days earlier…Then the voice of God whispered, "When you were at your lowest, I was there…Holding you. Carrying you. That's why you see only one set of footprints. I'm your rock of ages, here and forever more." "Yes…" Tasia cried. And once she understood what God was telling her, suddenly her soul zipped into the vast and sparkling sky.

In her heart and soul, she knew she had to go back. It is truly what her mother wanted. What Marcia wanted. But more importantly – what God wanted. He wasn't through with her yet. As her essence flashed through the vast, heavenly expanse, traveling a million miles an hour down that same highway, off to her left and right, her mother and Marcia both appeared once more. They looked at her and smiled and laughed. "Tasia, we're gonna be watching after you forever. We love you, but God loves you more. Go back and be the courageous and fearless woman you are. The woman you are destined to be," her mother consoled as her essence reached in and hugged her.

"Tasia, I love you. You know I'm your friend for eternity. I'll be watching after you until we meet again. You have so many kids to save. God always had purpose for you. Everything you went through was for a purpose. You have a heart made of gold the world has never seen. Go back and save those children who need you the most. You are loved."

Tears raced down Tasia's face seeing her mother and Marcia. Their essences faded away as she continued to travel down the highway of light. "You are loved, Tasia. You are loved." Her mother and Marcia's angelic voices kept repeating over and over again until finally her soul splashed through another sparkling light essence that flashed her right back into the hospital room the day she died and into her body.

GASP! Tasia's eyes widened. Luckily the heart rate monitor attached to the tip of her finger on her left hand was still activated.

Beep! Beep! Beep! A white female nurse who was preparing her body to be sent off to the morgue suddenly clutched her mouth in surprise and anxiety. "OH MY GOD! DR. FITZGERALD! DR. FITZGERALD! SHE'S ALIVE!" The nurse screamed. Tasia looked over at the nurse and suddenly wept and cried, her body trembling as she wondered what in the fuck was going on.

Seconds later, Dr. Fitzgerald, the same doctor that told Gemini about a good forty minutes earlier that Tasia passed away, stormed the room and dropped the clipboard in his hand. "OH SHIT!" He lunged towards Tasia's and checked her vitals on the EKG machine. "Oh my god! We need to stabilize her. Ma'am! It's gonna be ok! It's gonna be ok!"

~

Once Dr. Fitzgerald and Gemini made their way out the elevator and trekked down the silent halls of the ICU ward, Gemini's eyes latched down the open room at the very end of the long hallway. His vision got watery again, his heart raced, and his breathing became shallow as he and the doctor got closer and closer to Tasia's room. Gemini

amped up his pace, and once he and the doctor were inside the room, Gemini rushed to her side. She was fast asleep – put into a medically induced coma. 36 hours had passed since her last minute transplant surgeries. The whooshing sound of a ventilator pumping oxygen into a mask over her mouth mixed in with the steady, consistent beeps flowing from the heart rate monitor.

"Ohmygod, Tasia, ohmygod! This can't be real! Am I dreaming??!?"

"No, sir. This is real." The doctor cried, sounding joyful not dreadful. "We plan on waking her up out of the coma in an hour. I'm sure she'll be glad to see you." The doctor pulled up a chair from the corner of the room and sat it to the side of Tasia's bed so Gemini could sit down next to her and be there for her.

Once seated, Gemini picked up Tasia's hand and gently rubbed it, just like he did back in the ambulance. He leaned down and kissed it. "You're gonna be alright, mama. I'm gonna make sure to protect you always."

~

Tasia's eyes slowly opened, and once her cloudy vision became cloudless she stared directly into the face of Dr. Fitzgerald smiling. "Tasia, how do you feel."

"I—I—I'm fine…Kinda dizzy."

"Tasia… Baby girl…"

Tasia turned her head and saw Gemini staring at her, producing the biggest grin on his face. "Don't do that to me ever again. You almost had my ass wanting to jump off a cliff!" Gemini smiled, tears running down his face. He sniffled and kept rubbing her hand.

"Gemini!" Tasia sobbed, scrunching up her face. "I'm so sorry. I'm sorr—"

"Shhh, no need to apologize, baby girl. Let's just focus on the future."

She held his hand tightly, "You're right."

Chapter Fifty

Days passed…But these days felt like decades. Mr. Floyd's rotting, bloated corpse, along with his fat old black dick hoisted inside of Darnisha, was still crushing her. As the putrid foul smell from his body ruminated throughout the dimly lit trailer home bedroom, she just knew for certain she was going to die here. This was her fate. She fucked up – BIG TIME. All those years of scamming, defrauding, manipulating, exploiting, enslaving and murdering was finally here, visiting her, reaping her to experience this horrid karma.

Extreme hunger, dehydration and nausea squeezed all the little life she had in her body. She felt as if she was hours away from death. She didn't even possess the energy to scream anymore. Staring off into space, her vision was loopy as a massive, crunching headache ran down her temples and into her spine.

Knock! Knock! Knock! "Deacon Floyd!" Darnisha's weak eyes suddenly enlarged when she heard a voice from outside the trailer. "Deacon Floyd! You in there? It's Pastor Duke!"

Darnisha trembled and screamed, thinking her muzzled cry would get the man's attention. Pastor Duke kept knocking at the door. She wanted to produce tears to match her cry, but her dehydrated, limber body didn't possess enough liquid to yield waterworks from the ducts of her eyes.

Continuing to scream uncontrollably as Mr. Floyd's rotting mass lay on top of her, she prayed Pastor Duke would eventually make his way inside and rescue her. "Dear God, please. I am sorry for everything I've ever done. I promise you, please dear Lord, I promise with all my heart and soul if you rescue and deliver me, I will give my life over to you," she prayed in her mind.

Knock! Knock! Knock! "Deacon Floyd, you said be here promptly at 10 AM and now I'm here, bruh! Come on man! I ain't got all day…"

Pastor Duke, standing outside the trailer, was looking around wondering what was taking Deacon Floyd so long. Pastor Charles Duke, senior pastor at Holy Ghost Power Tabernacle, came by to pick up Deacon Floyd and take him down to a bank to help him co-sign on a loan to buy a house. "Deacon Floyd, come on nah! The loan officer's

appointment is in thirty minutes and it's Saturday, so you know the bank closes at 2!"

Pastor Duke, just stood there, rapidly tapping his right dress shoe against the patch of red clay dirt in front of Deacon Floyd's mobile home. Dressed modestly, Pastor Duke was sweating in his cheap JC Penny's black suit matched with the white shirt and tie he bought from the Marshall's out in West Palm Beach. He walked up to the door again. *Knock! Knock! Knock!* He shook his head and thought for a second…Damn, his truck was outside. Where would he be at? Then he wondered if something bad happened to Deacon Floyd. Shit, everyone in town knew Deacon Floyd had a thing for going down to Mother's Soul Food Restaurant and would slam three fried chicken sandwiches with onion and extra mayo on white bread down his bad breath smelling throat, followed up with a heavy serving of peach cobbler and vanilla ice cream.

Pastor Duke looked around and was about to do something that might get the police called on him. He stormed up the brick steps to the home and without hesitation, used his broad shoulders to bust through the front door. "Deacon Floyd! Are you alright, sir?" Pastor Duke asked with anxiety and caution stamped in every syllable of his question.

Suddenly a horrible, putrid smell hit Pastor Duke's nostrils, and he immediately clutched his mouth in disgust at the overpowering scent that reminded him of death. The lights inside the mobile home's living room were turned off. The somewhat scared pastor rummaged the room, looking for the light switch. Soon as he turned on the flickering lights, roaches dispersed like they heard gunshots and they were fleeing from cover. Pastor Duke slowly and fearfully sojourned through the mobile home hoping he wouldn't see something he wasn't quite prepared for this morning. Truth be told, he thought Deacon Floyd was kind of strange, but because Deacon Floyd was looking to buy a new house, Holy Ghost Power Tabernacle offered home loan assistance, thanks due to a Federal Government grant, to prospective home buyers who live in rural, impoverished communities like Belle Glade. That was the reason Pastor Duke found himself in Golden Gate trailer park – he needed to be there to co-sign on the new loan with Belle Glade Community First Bank.

"Deacon Floyd…Please tell me you alright," Pastor Duke trekked his way closer to his bedroom, and as soon as his cautious, discerning eyes peered into the open master bedroom Pastor Duke's stomach churned in angst and nausea. "Oh Lord – DEACON FLOYD!"

Pastor Duke stormed the room, clutching his face even harder, and his eyes widened and quickly attached to Deacon Floyd's rotting solid and motionless black blue naked mass still in missionary fuck position.

An army of flies swarmed the open and cracked pits of deteriorating flesh across his body. The only thing that seemed to still have life was the juicy jheri curl in his head and then Darnisha. “OH SHIT!” Pastor Duke cursed and then immediately regretted doing so. He was a holy man, and maybe used a curse word once or twice in his life time. This was probably his third.

Pastor Duke lunged to the bed and glanced down on Darnisha’s naked yellow sweaty and sticky abused flesh. Still attempting his best to cover his mouth, Pastor Duke quickly scoured the room looking for a shirt or something to help push the rotting bloated corpse off Darnisha. He pranced over to the dresser, hopping over Deacon Floyd’s brown and crusty skidded up white Hanes, pulled out a drawer in the dresser and grabbed a pair of jeans. Turning the cheap Wal-Mart Wranglers to make shift gloves, he dashed back over to Deacon Floyd’s corpse. He blanked his mind out, inserted his hands into the legs of the pants and then rocked and pushed Deacon Floyd’s body to the ground. THUD! Deacon Floyd’s now 300-pound bloated corpse shook the trailer home as soon as it hit the linoleum floor. Pastor Duke resisted the urge to vomit his breakfast as he looked down at Deacon Floyd’s dilated pupils and open mouth that now was a cesspool for maggots.

Pastor Duke immediately saw the razor blade on the nightstand. He grabbed it and cut the tape around Darnisha’s mouth and then unwrapped the handkerchief that muzzled her. “OH MY GOD! THANK YOU! THANK YOU!” Darnisha kept crying, damn near wanting to speak in tongues.

Seeing the woman damn near look lifeless tied up sent Pastor Duke into super-save a hoe mode. He cut the belts that confined her wrists to the bed. “I’m calling the police! I’m so sorry for this! I’m sorry!”

~

“Well, she ain’t no prostitute, that’s for sure…She said her name is Belinda Bishop. She’s from Chicagah…Escaped her pimp and ended up somehow in the hands of Deacon Floyd.” A white Belle Glade sheriff, with his hands on his hips, revealed to Pastor Duke Darnisha’s semi-truthful story.

A group of sheriffs along with a few older church members from Holy Ghost Power Tabernacle were standing outside the late Deacon Floyd’s mobile home, confused and stunned about the turn of events. As the gray Florida cloudy skies drizzled soft yet depressing rain, blue police lights flashed throughout the trailer park and into the windows of neighboring trailers. That was the reason why off from a distance, a small crowd formed, wondering what was going on. Seconds later,

EMTs walked out the mobile home doing their best to carry Deacon Floyd's body to a white morgue van nearby.

"Wooow…You said Chicago, sir?"

"Yeeezzir…Chicagah… Well, anyways, we're gonna take Deacon Floyd's body down to the morgue and try to contact next of kin. Never would've thought in a thousand years Deacon Floyd would be into sex trafficking…Makes you never second guess people."

Pastor Duke didn't say anything in response. He just shook his head in astonishment and confusion. He'd known Deacon Floyd for over 20 years and although he knew had a past – used to be a small-time drug dealer in neighboring Pohokee, he'd never thought Deacond Floyd was the type to buy sex slaves.

Doing his best to move forward the situation, he felt compelled to then inquire about Ms. Belinda. "So what you all are going to do with her?"

"Well, take her down to the shelter and then from there, I don't know…We'll let the social worker figure that out." The sheriff started walking back inside the mobile home.

"Ehh, that may not be necessary. I have enough space in my house for her." Pastor Duke wanted to sincerely help the woman and didn't want her to end up in back in the same despicable condition. Deep down in his prophetic soul, the Lord was telling him that this wasn't a coincidence. Belinda was in need in salvation, and since God worked in mysterious ways, the Holy Ghost was summoning him to bring prophetic power into this woman's life.

"Well, if you say so, Pastor Duke. But be careful. Sometimes you just gotta let people be." The Sheriff, knowing probably just how gullible and unassuming the young "Prophet" pastor was wanted to ensure he too didn't somehow end up dead.

Pastor Duke followed the Sheriff back into the mobile home. Darnisha, or now, "Belinda" was sitting down on a couch, finishing answering questions being thrown at her by another sheriff. Ironically she had on one of Deacon Floyd's family reunion shirts and a pair of his jeans.

"Well, Ms. Bishop, out the kindness of his holy heart, Pastor Duke wants to help you out…" The officer smiled.

Darnisha, with her head lowered, holding her elbows in both palms, slowly looked up at the smiling Pastor Duke. She was apprehensive at first. Very fucking apprehensive. Shit, after her experience of seeing everything suddenly flip the fucking script on her, the last thing she wanted was for some Pastor to suddenly turn into some serial killer and turn her into a rack of ribs to ate the fuck up on July the Fourth.

"Ms. Bishop, I don't mean to sound crazy or nothin' like that but

the Lord just spoke to me. I think he was speaking to you too. Now if you don't mind, I'd like to offer you my help. That's if you like…"

Suddenly Darnisha's eyes amplified. God truly answered her prayer. Had to be. It was too much of a coincidence. Right as she begged and beseeched the name of Jesus to come save a wretch like her from this horrible fucked up situation, he showed up and show out in the person of Pastor Duke. "Yes, thank you so much…" Darnisha cried.

~

"Tomorrow's church. Not saying you have to go or anything, but I'd sure like for you to join us. We savin' souls down there." Pastor Duke smiled at his dining room table, sitting adjacent to a hungry as hell Darnisha. She sipped on a big bowl of gumbo he just spent the last hour or so making as she got herself together, showered and took a much needed nap.

Pastor Duke didn't want to pry too much into her business. He knew it wasn't the time or the place. Belinda was a lost soul who the Lord saw fit for him to take care of in this trying time. The questions would come, eventually of course, but now the goal was getting her fully rehabilitated, fed, hydrated, prayed over and rested…all in the name of Jesus who died to save a wretch like you and me.

Making light conversation in between her sipping on the gumbo, Darnisha, or Belinda, as she was going to be called now, was just so overjoyed knowing the young and attractive Pastor Duke, who reminded her of Shemar Moore, was going out of his way to help her. Earlier that day, one of his church members, Sister Monroe, came by and donated a bunch of clothes, including a possible Sunday outfit, that she thought would fit Belinda. They'd belonged to her daughter, Felicia, who passed away years ago from a crack cocaine overdose.

"So where's your wife?" Belinda asked as she finished her gumbo.

Pastor Duke laughed, "I'm still looking for my Ruth…

"So, no kids?" She continued, shyly, sounding extra-humble.

"No. Of course not. I want to raise my children with my WIFE. No kids out of wedlock…Anyways, I have to go study for tomorrow's sermon. Like I said, no pressure." Pastor Duke got up from the table and made his way to his bedroom.

It was nearly 9PM now, and without a single television in the modest three bedroom house, Darnisha saw it fit to just go lay down, clear her mind, and keep thanking God for saving her. She went into the bedroom and picked over the clothes Sister Monroe donated. They were a far cry from the Gucci and Prada she was used to wearing. But anything on her back now was better than having Deacon Floyd's

rotting moist flesh on her.

She picked up the church outfit. It was a simple flower dress that probably cost no more than $20. She held it up against the guestroom wall mirror, smiled, and let out a tear. “Thank you God. I thank you…”

As “Belinda” lay in the bed, contemplating her life, she realized none of the shit she ever did meant a damn. Finessing was nothing more than a dark life that led to death and destruction. She had it in her now to want to immediately turn everything around and start from scratch. She didn’t know if she was going to do it here in Belle Glade or try to go back to Chicago, but scheming, scamming, finessing – doing scandalous hoe shit to get what she wanted – was now gonna be buried in the past. She just wanted to be normal now, and hopefully Pastor Duke, if willing could help her with that.

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“DON’T-AH! GRUMBLE-AH! OVAH! GAWWWWDDDD’S GENEROSITY! HE WILLLL! SEE YOU THROUGH! WHATVA, YOU-UH, NEEED-UGH! GAWD WILL! GAWD CAAAN-UGH! SO LET GOOOO AND LET GAWWWWHHHDDDD-UH, HAVE HIS WAY!” Pastor Duke was preaching up a storm inside the small storefront church. With only about a good forty people in attendance, Belinda was sitting all the way in the back, a bit scared. Other than a funeral here and there, this was the first time in Belinda’s adult life she was attending a normal church service.

Pastor Duke was whooping and hollering, typical holiness Pentecostal style. As the organist matched his fiery preaching, people in the small audience were waving their hands, clapping and agreeing with Duke’s delivery. Belinda just sat there, a bit timid and intimidated. She’d seen these types of churches before on TV, but just thought they were comedic. As Pastor Duke finished his sermon, the organist switched gears and started playing a softer sounding, inviting song. Pastor Duke wiped his face with a handkerchief and attempted to control his breathing. “And you all know what time it is – it’s altar call. Give your life today to Jesus. See, you know what I love about Jesus. No matter what you’ve gone through in your life. No matter how much you’ve done. He can turn it all around.”

The four choir members sang background vocals to the soft-sounding song off key as Pastor Duke made his way deeper into the audience, sauntering closer and closer to Belinda. With his beady eyes fixed on her, he continued, “It ain’t never too late to turn it around. Do it today.”

Belinda thought about all the fucked up shit she’d done and how

ultimately it landed her here in this small, hot church in the Florida country. This was her ultimate destiny. This is what God ordained. He saved her, and now she needed to uphold her promise to God. That promise she gave when Pastor Duke knocked on Deacon Floyd's door. "Do it today, it's never too late…" Pastor Duke continued. Flashes of Belinda's life swam through her still-red head. Tears swelled in her eyes. She stood up, "I wanna be with Jesus. Take me to the King!"

"HALLEILUJAH! THANK YA JESUS!" A few older women shouted in unison as their old humble eyes widened in excitement that Belinda decide to give her life to God today.

"ALL THE SAINT SAY AMEN!" Next thing you know the organist switched gears on the keyboard and starting playing "Let the Church say amen…"

As everyone stood up – clapping, smiling and singing, looking at Belinda, they watched her collapse to the floor, crying uncontrollably. A morbidly obese church nurse who looked like Esther Rolle assisted a shouting and wailing Belinda up off the maroon carpet. Sitting her down in one of the pews with her arms stretched out, the church nurse quickly fanned her face with one of those funeral home fans that got a picture of Martin Luther King, Jr. on the back. "Let the church say amen. Amen. Amen," the church nurse sang in her deep bellow, hovering over Sister Belinda, who was now saved, sanctified and filled with the Holy Ghost.

"EIH KOLOLO DOLO SAH! THANK YA, JEEE-ZAS! THANK YAH! THANK YA! EIH SHONDO!" Belinda screamed, speaking in tongues. She opened her eyes and saw nothing but angels around her playing harps. Then she saw the hands of white Jesus with blue eyes stretch out and try to hold her and embrace her. Every saint got a past, every sinner got a future. God wasn't through with Belinda yet. He was still working on her.

Chapter Fifty-One

Seven years later…

"Girl, oh my god, I can't believe we're doing this! Oh MY GOD!" Sarah, Tasia's law school classmate and now one of her best friends jumped in excitement as they waited with other graduates to be called into the vast university auditorium on this sunny Miami mid-morning in the middle of May.

"Girl, I can't either. Three long years. All them nights of studying, crying, praying, cramming…It paid off. It's so surreal," Tasia beamed in exhilaration, anticipating the ceremony speaker to summon the graduates into the auditorium.

As Tasia looked around, disbelief over took her because she still couldn't fathom she made it this far. Her doe brown eyes slowly scanned and absorbed the packed corridor outside the entrance of the auditorium, her pupils gazing the anxious, yet happy faces of grads decked out in black caps and gowns. As grads chirped in excitement amongst each other, Tasia closed her eyes, and she saw a distant flash of her near death experience. Her mother and Marcia, smiling, affirmed to her in their angelic voices she was walking in the rhythm of her divine purpose.

Tasia, now close to twenty five years old, was on the cusp of graduating summa cum laude, top of her class, from the University of Miami's Law School. The first of many of her dreams came true. After recovering from her entire ordeal years ago, she still had the resolve to keep her life moving forward. After completing high school on time, she received a full ride scholarship to the University of Miami where she stuck to her guns and got her bachelor's degree in Political Science with a minor in Spanish. Over the last seven years, she kept at her jiu jitsu and healthy lifestyle, and like Gemini became a black belt.

She met and made so many new friends – friends from all walks of life, including Sarah. Sarah was half black, half Jewish from Philadelphia, and her and Tasia became BFFs from the day they met as dorm roommates their sophomore year in undergrad. Both girls eventually went to law school together and decided after graduation they were going to open their own family law practice and nonprofit to help children living in impoverished, destitute situations.

But more importantly, as time went on through the years, Tasia and Gemini grew closer, and they'd eventually decided to date. Their entire testing tribulation made them both super close. So close, Gemini immediately relocated from Houston and moved to Miami to be with Tasia throughout her entire college career. Two years into

them dating, since Gemini was still technically enlisted in the Marines, he was called to serve tours in Iraq and Afghanistan. Although it was nerve wracking for the both of them, him being away from time to time worked out well. It allowed her to mature more and also gave her the room and space to focus on her studies and travel abroad.

"Ladies and Gentlemen – Please welcome University of Miami Law School's Class of 2025." The ceremony speaker blared from the auditorium stage's rostrum, beckoning the class of 130 grads to make their way inside. With Ms. Summa Cum Laude at the lead, the graduates sauntered through the double silver auditorium doors. Family members, friends, faculty and others seated rose to their feet and began smiling and gawking at the graduates as they clapped and cheered them on.

Faint and soft classical violin music resounded from the auditorium's tall speakers as Tasia paced down the aisle. The graduating class made their way to the front section of the auditorium, and Tasia walked to the stage to be seated next to the dean. Customary for those giving the commencement speech. Once Tasia made herself comfortable and sat down, she gazed out into the sea of elated friends, family members and other ceremony guests. Papi, Gemini's father was seated by himself in the audience. He grinned at her, winked and blew a kiss. She blew one back.

Although this was one of the happiest days of her life, seeing Papi just made her wish Gemini could be there. But she understood his call of duty was more important. Earlier that morning, he'd facetimed her from Iraq and wished her well and they prayed to God that he would give her the energy and spirit to give an awe-inspiring commencement speech.

Looking around in the audience again, she could see mothers and fathers of other graduates, and a part of her grew depressed knowing she didn't have anyone there, other than Papi and a few friends, celebrating her graduation. Doing her best to hold back tears, if there was one thing she could have more than anything else in the world, it would be having her mother, Marcia, Tahmir and Gemini in the audience. But they weren't. She just had to have faith knowing her mother and Marcia were watching over her like they promised in her near death experience. Gemini, although thousands of miles away, was there with her in spirit. And although she never fully got closure on Tahmir, and never fully believed he died, she just hoped he was somewhere, rooting for her.

The graduation ceremony immediately began right on time – 11 am. After an hour or so of different speakers, mainly faculty and alumni, giving their life advice, the dean walked up to the rostrum and grinned, "And now ladies and gentlemen, we have a surprise

tonight. Mr. Washington, the mic is yours…"

Rumbling conversation among graduates, family members and other guests dithered, and the auditorium went silent as everyone wondered who this Mr. Washington was. Then from the side stage, a team of bodyguards escorted Deon Washington, now President and CEO of Blitz Capital to the rostrum. Yup, that's right…DEON WASHINGTON. The man who started Teflon Don Entertainment. The same evil (well not really since he was reaping karma) nigga who just so happened to run into Darnisha's scamming murderous ass years ago and eventually pimped her off for millions and then sold her to the deceased Deacon Floyd for a dub.

The audience erupted into cheers of surprise. Never in a million years did anyone think that someone on the magnitude like Deon Washington would make an appearance at a law school graduation ceremony. The cheers and clapping settled, and Mr. Washington thanked the dean for the invite.

"Ladies and gentlemen, class of 2025. I'm here this morning because one day, I was sitting back, watching TV in my office, counting all this money I make," he laughed. The audience erupted into laughter. "Well, years ago, when I was still ascending in my career when I was head of Teflon Don, I happened upon a large sum of money. Can't tell you where I got it from," he smiled and laughed again. The audience snickered once more. From the sound of it, it was almost as if he was joking the money was from drug trade. "Anyways, enough about the sources of my finances. I decided I was going to stash the money away and use it for a very special purpose. I make enough money as it is, and I just didn't want to do the typical thing of giving my money away to some nonprofit that I didn't quite trust or some large charity that truth be told already makes enough money. Dean Pittman and I go way back. In fact, many may not know this, but before Dean Pittman got into academia, he used to be a lawyer, and was one of the best tax attorneys in the nation." Deon chuckled, "Instead of going to H&R Block, I hit up Dean Pittman." The jokes just kept rolling off Deon's tongue. "Anywho, I asked Dean Pittman. I said, 'hey man – I wanna give this money away to a law student who wants to do something big. But not just big in a way of making a bunch of money. But big in making impact…You know of any students who are trying to make real change in the community?' I asked. Dean Pittman responded, 'Of course…Our summa cum laude, Ms. Tasia Johnson…'".

As soon Tasia heard her name come from Deon's mouth, she clutched her mouth in surprise and squinted her eyes, ready to release a flood of tears.

"Dean Pittman, I would like the honor and privilege of presenting Ms. Tasia Johnson, summa cum laude of the class of 2025, with Blitz

Capital's first ever Social Justice Enterprise Grant. I want to give this money to a student who has the wit, power, tenacity, and smarts to help fight and advocate for disadvantaged members of our society. Tasia, could you please come to receive this check?"

With tears storming down her cheeks, ruining her make up, Tasia stood up and made her way to the podium. The audience members along with the grads stood up and cheered away, rooting for Tasia, some even crying because they knew Tasia deserved it. Even her bestie Sarah was bawling more than Tasia. Hah! The fucking irony, right? This money just so happened to be the money Deon found on Darnisha, and he stashed it away, wanting to put it to good use. Funny how the universe works – those funds were proceeds due to Darnisha selling Tasia off to that sick serial killer fuck Zach Gadowsky. And now years later, they were being given to Tasia to use so she and Sarah could start their own law firm practice and nonprofit.

Tasia shook Deon's hand and then gave him the biggest, tightest hug. Shit, only if she knew where the money came from, that hug would've been even tighter, damn near suffocating him. She took the check sealed in a huge manila envelope and walked back to her seat. Dean Pittman made his way back to the podium, "That was very awesome. Tasia, you deserve it and more. And on that note, Ms. Johnson we have one other surprise for you. The lights please…"

Suddenly the lights in the auditorium faded to black, and a huge projector screen rolled down behind the stage for everyone in the audience to see. A short film started playing…

Tasia turned in her seat to watch the video. "You are one in a million…" flashed across the amethyst and orange screen as a piano remix of Aaliyah's *One In A Million* played. As the song faded and played quietly, Sarah appeared in the video.

"Tasia, my friend, my bestie, my roommate, my spiritual counselor, my ride or die. My everything. You've been there through the thick and thin. When I didn't have a shirt on my back, you gave me the one off yours. I remember when I first met you, I knew there was something special about you, and when you told me everything you'd gone through in life, it all made sense. You are special on the inside out, like none other. You are definitely one in a million. Just saying all of this right now is making me emotional."

Hearing those words made Tasia's eyes water even more. This was all too much for her. As Sarah kept talking, thanking her for everything she'd done for her over the years they'd known each other, the video faded to another speaker. It was Crystal, Tasia's mentee who she'd met and tutored down at the Boys and Girls Club of Miami. Crystal, who Tasia met when she was thirteen, was now eighteen. She grew up, experiencing similar dark situations like Tasia. Child abuse.

Sexual assault. Being made fun of for her size and complexion. But when she met Tasia, her life changed drastically. She poured her heart out, thanking Tasia for inspiring her to be a determined woman and she was now on her way to college. As the video kept playing, a montage of Tasia's friends, other mentees and all the people who Tasia crossed paths with over the last seven years poured their hearts out, thanking and praising Tasia for being the strong woman she was. As the video seemed to come to an end, the video faded to Gemini, wearing his Marine uniform. Seeing Gemini on video, with that familiar pearly white smile plastered across his mouth, matching his well-trimmed beard, was sending Tasia into a deeper emotional frenzy.

"Tasia, my love. You are the most beautiful woman I've ever met before. Not because of your looks, because you damn shole iz sexy," he laughed. He continued, "…But because of your soul. You radiate something beyond all imagination." Gemini then started to tear up and choke on his words, "I'm sorry for being emotional right now, but Tasia, you already know everything we've been through. And remember when I told you at your bedside to look forward to the future. Well, I'm ready for our future."

The lights in the auditorium dimmed back on. "AHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHH! AHHHHHHHHHH!" Suddenly the entire audience erupted in emotion the second Gemini graced his presence at the staircase near the stage. Dressed in his Marine uniform, tears running down his face, he walked up on stage with a black box in his hand. Tasia couldn't control herself anymore. The second she saw him, she jumped out of her seat and lunged towards Gemini at a million miles per hour. They hugged and kissed. Then Gemini did what everyone expected him to do. He got down on one knee and opened the box. Inside was a twelve-carat diamond ring cut with perfect clarity. "Tasia. Will you become Mrs. McCray?"

Clutching her mouth, eyes squinted, tears running down her face like Niagara Falls, Tasia accepted Gemini's proposal. "Yes…I do. I love you, Gemini. I loved you from the moment you saved me."

Chapter Fifty-Two

Three years later…

"Hey, babe, I'm 'bout to go run to the grocery store, you need anything?" Gemini, holding their two-year-old son TJ, "Tahmir Jamil", had one foot out the door of their house and the other still inside, asking his wife if she needed him to pick up anything from Whole Foods.

"Can you make sure you pick up a bag of spinach and some oranges?" Tasia responded, scrambling through her office not too far away from the front door of the house, looking to head out the door herself to work. "Damn, have you seen my laptop bag?" Tasia barked, frantic as usual.

After graduating law school, her and Gemini decided to move back to Chi-town. They bought spacious greystone in Kenwood so she wouldn't be too far from her office. Sarah, her bestie and partner, moved as well, and the two quickly opened up their small law firm and nonprofit right in the city – thanks to that Social Justice Enterprise grant. Everything was coming back full circle.

"Haha, babe, just relax for a second, it's right here by the door…" Gemini smiled, holding and playing with TJ. "You see mommy running all over the place.?" Gemini laughed. TJ chuckled back as he gawked at his mother through his innocent eyes. "MOMMY! You gon fall and hurt yourself!" The two-year-old chirped still observing his mother frantically prance between the office and hallway, damn near about to slip in her stiletto pumps.

Tasia, wearing her usual business suit, grabbed the laptop bag, then waltzed over to Gemini and TJ. The busy lawyer-mother-wife kissed and hugged the both of them. "Love ya'll but gotta go! I'm late for my meeting." Tasia then stormed through the open front door of the townhouse.

"Love you too!" Gemini beamed as he waved goodbye and watched Tasia hop in the back of an Uber black truck.

Gemini, was a stay-at-home dad and a writer. After being honorably discharged, he decided to use his enlistment bonus to start a publishing company – Zodiac Media, LLC. He was now one of the top urban fiction writers in the publishing industry and within three years had wrote close to eighty books. "You ready to go learn some math, lil man?" Gemini asked TJ. "Yes, Daddy…" TJ smiled and hugged his father's neck.

"Good, 'cuz you gotta help daddy with the publishing business when you get older!"

~

“We’ll be in touch, Mr. Gacy. We look forward to your proposal.” Tasia stood up from her desk seat and reached out to shake the hand of Harold Gacy. She produced the biggest, agreeing smirk on her beautiful brown face. Sarah, seated across from Tasia, stood up as well and shook his hand. Mr. Gacy was a local young black real estate developer and entrepreneur who was bidding on a project to help Tasia and Sarah open up a new youth community center in the Englewood neighborhood, right in the heart of the South Side.

Once Mr. Gacy made his way out Tasia’s office, Sarah trailed him and closed the door. “So, what do you think?” she asked as she turned her attention towards Marcia.

“I think we should go with him. He’s young. Has a lot of ambition. Cares about the city. I mean, he’s already done a lot for the community and he’s not shady. You can tell he’s not in it for the money. Not like those white pricks that came in here earlier.” Tasia explained as she fumbled through Mr. Gacy’s proposal on her desk.

“Yeah, girl. I didn’t like those clowns anyways… Glad you see what I see…” Sarah laughed as she made her way back to her seat to get her laptop and her copy of Mr. Gacy’s proposal.

After coming back to Chicago, rather than opening up a law office in the middle of downtown or somewhere upscale, Tasia did something that to many would seem a bit unusual. But for her it was a specular idea, an idea that would for sure keep her grounded and purposed. Although it took a lot of thinking and praying, she had her very own proposal – with the money she got from Deon Washington’s Social Justice Enterprise grant, she offered to buy Marcia’s mother’s house in cash and use it for office space for her law firm and nonprofit.

This idea had been running through her mind for years, she just didn’t know exactly how she’d get the money to do it. She figured since she had a job offer to work at a large corporate law firm in Miami, she could put off starting her own law firm dream for a moment, work for a good three years, save up and then buy the house. But when fate and destiny landed the check from Deon Washington in her hands the day of her graduation, she knew it was God, her mother and Marcia telling her to make the move – take the leap of faith. Everything was going to work out.

When she approached Marcia’s mother, at first her mother was a bit hesitant, but when Tasia recounted her near death experience, her mother wept and gave in. Within a month, Marcia’s mother moved out and relocated to California. Tasia and Sarah then retrofitted the house; turning the upstairs into their actual office. McCray, Pearlman &

Associates. Downstairs was then used as a small community center called “Marcia’s House” – in dedication to her murdered friend. The nonprofit offered a number of programs and services like speech therapy, exercise classes, mentoring, tutoring, etc. Marcia’s House was rapidly expanding, and Tasia and Sarah decided it was best to expand into other parts of the city that needed their assistance. Hence, the new community center in Englewood.

“Ohh, by the way, did you check the mail?” Sarah asked once she grabbed her belongings and made her way out of Tasia’s office. “Nah, girl…You know that’s the last thing on my mind,” Tasia laughed. “Girl, shit, you ain’t telling me nothing new. I’ll go get it.”

As Tasia kept reading down at some other contracts on her desk, Sarah emerged back into her office, but the typical goofy, bubbly look was erased from her face. From expression buried in the features of her light yellow face, you would’ve thought she saw a ghost. Shit, four of them. Tasia looked up at her bestie and could instantly tell something was a tad off.

“Wassup? What’s wrong?” Sarah made her way closer to her desk and slowly handed her a letter. “What’s this? A bill or something?” Tasia nervously chuckled. Once her eyes glanced down and saw who the letter’s sender, her heart pounded with fury, her breathing became shallow and fast and her eyes watered.

Sarah lunged towards the office door and quickly closed it. Knowing her friend was on the verge of having a nervous breakdown, she swung around her desk and held her, “Shhh, just relax for a moment. Just relax. Let’s just see what’s on the inside, ok…”

Tasia looked at the sender and the address again. Jashaun Johnson. Care of Touch of Grace Hospice Center. 8250 South Cicero Avenue, Burbank, Illinois. As her well-manicured hands trembled, attempting to open the letter, she wondered why her “cousin” after over a decade was sending her a letter, especially from a hospice. She didn’t put two and two together until she began reading the letter aloud.

~

Dear Tasia…

I know by now you are probably thinking why in the hell am I even daring to attempt to write and communicate with you considering all of the horrific, dark and extreme things I, along with my mother and sister put you through. Some people say time heals everything, but what we did to you could take eons, if not millions of years, to allow you to heal from the adversity we subjected you to on a daily basis for years. So, with that being said, if you decide to not

want to continue reading this letter, just know, I understand completely, and just know that from the truest depths of my heart and soul I am truly sorry for everything I've ever done or said to you. Apologies aren't enough. Trust me, I know. Because like you, I too found myself trying to forgive "her". And I say "her" because I no longer consider her a "mother," just the channel in which I streamed into this crazy world.

Anyways, if you decided to keep reading, the purpose for me writing you is to let you know that when we last saw each other, yes, I was your abusive, manipulative, wild, crazy, violent, sexually promiscuous homosexual cousin that made you do and see things no child should ever see and go through. Ten years later though, I want you to believe I am no longer that person. That person died the day I was diagnosed with HIV/AIDS. Although when I was initially diagnosed I was told I could live a normal and healthy life; that turned out to be partly true. I've been living now with HIV for over 10 years, and I thought for sure I was going to be alright. In that time, I changed my life and decided to become a practicing Buddhist. With wanting to help all sentient beings reach enlightenment, I made it my life's mission to bring inner peace and joy to everyone – everyone including you. Of course, life doesn't always go the way we want. And we just have to accept that and move on. Six months ago, after experiencing the worst pain of my life, my doctors informed me that due to my HIV/AIDS status, I have inoperable terminal kidney cancer. They gave me four months to live. That was three months ago. I have some good days. Some bad days. But now I'm at the point where those bad days are surely outnumbering the good, and truth be told, I do not know how long I have left here on Earth.

Enough about me though…Because I will be alright. I have faith everything happens for a reason. I've known about you and your work with Marcia's House now for years, and honestly, I'm so proud of you. Through everything you went through, you became this beautifully powerful and inspiring woman. A woman who "her" could never be. A woman who "her" knew you were going to be, which is why she treated you the way she did. There's just so much I'd like to continue sharing with you. My hands are getting tired now. But if you don't mind, and again I completely understand if you choose not to, I would love to see you one last time and apologize in person.

My new residence is:
Touch of Grace Hospice Center
Room 2206
8250 South Cicero Avenue
Burbank, Illinois 60459

Again, NO PRESSURE. If this is the last time I am able to

communicate with you, just know, you are loved, you are LOVE, and I hope you one day are able to find the peace you deserve.

Love,
Jashaun

~

The second Tasia finished reading the letter aloud, she scrunched it up in her chest, and both her and Sarah wailed uncontrollably. So many emotions, both good and bad, overpowered Tasia's mind, body and soul. Feeling extremely conflicted, on one hand she was so moved by the letter, wanting to immediately drop everything she was doing and go visit her dying cousin. But on the other hand, going through years of trauma at the hands of him, his mother and sister, she just didn't truly know if he was being sincere and if this was some all big ploy.

Sarah went to the corner of the room, grabbed some paper towel and help Tasia wipe her face free of tears so she wouldn't further ruin her make up. "Tasia, do what you think is right for you. I can't say you should go. And I can't say you shouldn't go. You'll know in due time what you should do…" Sarah hugged her tight once more, then released her embrace and exited her office, giving her the much needed time and space to contemplate her next moves.

Chapter Fifty-Three

7 PM…The front door to Tasia and Gemini's townhouse creaked open, and a sickly and nauseated looking Tasia slowly and painfully trekked her way inside the posh, luxury townhouse. TJ, playing in the living room, saw his depressed-looking mother waltz inside. He dropped the teddy bear in his hands and dashed towards his mother. "Mooommmmmy!" he screamed with a huge grin stretched from corner to corner of his face, revealing his tiny white teeth.

"Hey, TJ! You miss me?" Tasia smiled despite feeling emotionally torn from Jashaun's letter she read earlier.

"Yes! I miss you all the time! You wanna watch TV with me?" TJ asked, beaming his wide leer as usual.

"Just give me a few minutes to change out of my clothes and I'll be in the living room with you, ok?" Tasia assured but sounded mellow.

Once Tasia slipped out of her pumps, she made her way into the kitchen where Gemini was cooking dinner for the family. Grilled chicken shish kabobs, yellow rice, black beans and Caesar salad was on the menu for the night. Everyone's favorite.

"Hey, babe," Tasia made her presence known to Gemini as she cracked open the fridge and whipped out a bottle of chilled red wine. That's how she preferred to drink her merlot. She poured herself a glass and began sipping away, still standing in the kitchen staring off to nothing in particular. Gemini sauntered over to her, kabobs in his hand, and planted a kiss on her cheek. "How was work?" he asked as he returned to the stove.

"It was cool…" By the angst buried in her tone, Gemini knew something was off. "Just cool? You sure?" He knew his wife like he knew the back of his hand, so he could tell something was off with her disposition. "Oh yeah, just a long, busy day. Just kind of tired…"

"Mhrrm-k," he responded and continued cooking. Before Tasia kept her promise and made it to the living room to go watch TV with TJ, she roamed to her office to charge up her laptop. As she pulled out her mini purple HP and a few case files she needed to go over later tonight, Jashaun's letter just so happened to come out with the files, instantly falling to the ground. She picked it up and opened it with

caution. Quickly glancing over it again, seeing his words, were tearing at her heart. She spent the last few hours wrestling whether or not she should go and visit him. On one hand she knew it would be the right thing to do, but on the other she wanted no bitter reminder of her past and all the bullshit she went through living with those crazy abusive ghetto fucks. Even if Jashaun claimed he was a "changed" man now, just seeing him was going to possibly send her mind to do something she may later regret.

Scrunching the letter up again against her chest, Tasia lowered her head and cried. However, unbeknownst to her, her hyper-aware husband was standing off near the door, observant of everything. He slowly walked into the office, "Tasia, what's wrong?" he asked. She looked up at him, her eyes puffy and reddened from crying, and handed him the balled up letter. He read it, and within seconds, doing his best to fight back tears, he reached in and hugged Tasia. He kissed her on the forehead… "It's time to forgive him, babe. He was just a child. If you want, I can go with you…"

"So, you think I should go? I just don't, I just d-dd-ddon't want to be reminded of what happened to me…" Tasia stammered and choked on her words.

"That was then…this is now. He needs you. And you need him. It'll heal the wounds."

~

Later that night, after deciding she was going to grant Jashaun's request and go and visit him, Tasia shot Sarah a text letting her know she was going to take the following day off to go see him. Fully supportive of her friend, Sarah told her she'd reschedule any meetings.

The following morning, Tasia woke up, hopped in the shower and then zoomed to the hospice center in Burbank, a southwest suburb not too far away from the city. She hopped out her car, and slowly meandered through the half-full parking lot of the hospice center. Making her way inside, she approached the receptionist's counter, "Excuse me, ma'am, I'm here to see Jashaun Johnson. I believe he's in room 2206…" The older Hispanic woman receptionist gave Tasia directions on how to get to his room.

Making her way through the hospital, a flood of memories brought her back to the night she attempted suicide. Hearing the faint echoes of wails, sobs and coughing mixed in with the slow and steady beeping of heart rate monitors increased her anxiety as she made her way closer and closer to Jashaun's room. 2206. Her eye's saw the room number and immediately peered in. There he was…laying in bed, hundreds of tubes running through his body as a ventilator

pumped oxygen into his mouth. Tasia knocked on the side of the door's frame… "Ja-jj-jashaun.." Tasia stuttered, fighting to hold back her tears of both anger and joy as saw her frail cousin withering away in the bed.

His head at first, cocked to the side, staring out a window, turned and once he saw his cousin through his hazy and morphine-induced glassy eyes, they widened a bit in surprise and joy. With his barely open eyes swelling with tears, he reached out, wanting to give her a hug. Tasia, reluctant at first to reciprocate, suddenly heard Gemini's distant voice reminding her to forgive and move on. She gave in, leaned down and hugged him, but not tightly because she could feel that her squeeze could break his frail rib cage and kill him faster than the cancer destroying his body. Once he released her, he looked at her, trembling, tears pouring out of his eyes. He removed his oxygen mask, "Tasia…I'm so sorry. I'm so sorr-rry," he stammered, still showing signs of his partial brain damage. Tasia, not wanting him to suffer trying to squeeze out his apology, grabbed his hand and helped him put the oxygen mask back on, "Shhh, I forgive you, Jashaun. I forgive you. It's ok…"

Jashaun, very weak, lifted his hand and pointed towards a seat in the corner. He took the mask off his face once more, "Sit down, I hhha-have so much tt-tto tell you…"

Tasia made her way to the corner, pulled the seat up to his bedside and spent the next five or six hours talking with her cousin. In that time, he did his best to talk about what he had been doing with his life over the last ten years. He'd eventually went back to school, got his diploma and then got his bachelor's degree and master's in counseling. He worked as a crisis counselor at a number of nonprofits across the city. Whether it was working with homeless people, gay and lesbian youth who had been put out of their house by their unaccepting parents, domestic violence survivors, victims of sexual assault, whatever type of trauma existed, Jashaun was there, playing a huge role in helping people get their lives together. He told her she was his motivation and felt like it was the only thing he could do aside from giving her apology to right his wrong.

He even told her about Jasmine. She was now living in Oklahoma with her white husband who she met in the Navy along with their three children. She was working now as a nurse practitioner for a major hospital system in Tulsa.

As they continued reminiscing over their bittersweet memories living in the projects, eventually their conversation turned deep and dark. Jashaun wanted to talk about Tahmir. "I really wanted to reach out to you to let you know I had nothing to do with Tahmir getting arrested…"

"Oh, Jashaun, we don't need to talk about tha—"

"Just listen," he interrupted. "I did some digging on my own and it all made sense."

"What do you mean?"

"She hired this guy named Jaime to rape me. That's how I ended up losing a lot of blood and got brain damage. That's how I got AIDS…"

"What?" Tasia grabbed her mouth and shook her heard. All this time she thought Jashaun was in on the plot to get Tahmir arrested and sent back off to prison. "What do you mean?"

"She paid him to rape me…I don't have proof. But I know that's what she did… And she killed Khai. That night, she came home, she came in my room and told me the plan was in effect. Up until that week I had no idea what the plan was gonna be. I knew she was gonna do something. I just didn't think it would entail her lying to me, keeping me in the dark and paying someone to rape me."

"But what about the semen…"

"She probably had sex with Tahmir and saved his sperm."

Tasia lowered her head, absolutely fucking astonished. Darnisha did all of that just to get Tahmir out the house. What a fucking horrible ass low life gutter hoe bitch Tasia thought. The more Jashaun kept talking, the more Tasia came to fully understand Darnisha was the pure fucking personification of evil. Darnisha manipulated and destroyed any and everything for her own personal gain and had no qualms at all doing it. Worst of all, Darnisha was the type of sleezy bitch that instead of risking her own life and health, she sacrificed her children to the mean and vicious streets for a quick buck. The more she thought about her own son, TJ, the more she knew it took a deranged psychotic bitch to even conjure up a plan of that magnitude just to make money.

Hearing this story was fueling flames on a fire that Tasia seemed to have put out years ago. The more she thought about it, the more she just hated the fact that Darnisha had been never heard from again. Everyone just presumed she was dead. Maybe she killed herself because she was a wanted woman in Chicago. Or maybe someone got to her and killed her for being the snake bitch she was. Whatever her outcome was, Tasia didn't feel satisfied. Granted, Tasia assumed Darnisha not being alive was a good thing – she couldn't continue her reign of manipulative, scheming terror. But death, in Tasia's eyes, was an easy punishment. She deserved more. If she knew where that bitch was buried, she'd dig her rotting corpse up and kill her a thousand times again. If that bitch was truly dead, she didn't die hard enough.

So many questions flooded her mind, and she wanted to squeeze as much out of Jashaun as possible. "I also have something else to tell

you…" Jashaun continued.

"What's that…"

"She's al—" Suddenly Jashaun began to uncontrollably cough. He coughs turned deep, and his eyes rolled in the back of his head. Tasia quickly put the mask back over Jashaun's face to help him get oxygen, but it didn't seem to help to no avail. A few nurses stormed the room, "Ma'am, can you give us some privacy for a second?" One older white female nurse asked.

"Sure…" Tasia said as she got up. The nurses pulled the curtains around Jashaun's bed. As he continued to cough hard and uncontrollably, one of the nurses emerged, looking frantic, "Yeah, you probably should leave now. We're gonna have to do an emergency tracheotomy on him to get oxygen in his lungs, sorry," she said to Tasia as she went to go grab a doctor.

Tasia wanted to stay. No, she HAD to stay. If she thought she heard what Jashaun was about to say, it was imperative for her to get her hands on that information. She lingered around for a bit, hoping Jashaun would quickly recover, but as seconds grew to minutes, it sure didn't seem that way. The same nurse came back in the room moments later with a doctor to her side, "Ma'am, please… You can come back tomorrow."

Tasia huffed and exhaled. She looked back at Jashaun, her eyes turned to investigative slits. That bitch Darnisha is alive. She just knew it. Once she made her way back to the parking lot of the hospice center, she hopped in her car and zoomed straight home. Although she didn't have not a single clue to work with, she spent the rest of the night stalking the internet, seeing if she could find any traces of Darnisha's trifling ass. Facebook. Instagram. Background check websites. EVERYTHING.

However, if the evil murderous bitch was alive and well, and Jashaun knew about it, that bitch wasn't using her real name… Of course not, because she would've been caught by now. Tasia was going find out one way or another, and tomorrow morning she was going march her ass right back to that hospice center and get the muhfuckin' answers she needed so she could find that trifling nigga bitch and bring her fake wannabe KeKe Wyatt ass to justice.

Chapter Fifty-Four

"Tasia, don't over think this…Sometimes the meds they give hospice patients will have them saying stupid shit…I saw it with my own mother," Gemini, standing in the kitchen making breakfast for him and lil man, was concerned Tasia was putting way too much thought into a possible slip of tongue.

"Ehh, I don't know, baby. He was just about to say she's alive and then he started choking and coughing really bad. He knows something…" Tasia responded, eating an apple. She wasn't going to partake in the breakfast with Gemini and TJ because she was already amped to bounce and go straight to the hospice center to figure out what Jashaun was about to say. Her intuition was on fire – she just knew he was going to tell her the truth.

"Do you already have closure though?" Gemini asked, scrambling eggs.

"Fuck no…" Tasia spat. Hearing her drop the expletive with no care, Gemini spun on his feet and nodded towards TJ in his high chair. "Sorry…" Tasia shrieked as she finished munching on the apple.

"Look, Tasia. All I am saying is, is that really important now? Jashaun could be gone any day now. Let's just try to make his last remaining days as comfortable as possible…"

Tasia rolled her eyes, although Gemini couldn't see her. "You're right, babe. Anyways, I need to bounce." Tasia pranced over to Gemini, kissing him on the lips and then kiss TJ in his high chair. Once outside, she hopped in her car and sped off to the hospice.

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Finding herself back inside the stale-smelling, frigid hospice center, Tasia, already knowing where she needed to go, marched with purpose to Jashaun's room. Yesterday she found herself getting lost despite the directions the receptionist had given her, but today she knew exactly how to navigate her way around maze of seemingly unending hallways that connected to each other. She arrived at Room 2206. His door again was wide open, except this time when she

peered in, his bed was empty. She walked in, looked around, and still saw some of belongings.

Befuddled and worry growing in her stomach, she walked out the room and caught the attention of the first nurse passing her. “Excuse me, ma’am…Jashaun Johnson. He was in this room. Do you know what happened to him?”

The older white nurse shook her head, “I’m sorry, ma’am, but Jashaun passed away earlier this morning around 2 AM…”

Hearing the devastating news sent Tasia into panic and grief. She grabbed her mouth and fought back tears. The nurse got closer to Tasia and rubbed her arm to console her, “You have my condolences. Would you like to speak to one of our grief counselors?” the empathetic nurse asked, probably standard script for nurses here to follow for when someone receives unexpected news of a relative’s passing.

“No, I’m fine…Have a wonderful day…” Tasia made her way down the hallway and back to her car. Once inside, she cried her heart out. A part of her wished Jashaun would’ve reached out to her much earlier, and perhaps they could’ve had a better relationship in his last days. But a part of her grieved because the source of information she longed for was dead.

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The following week, a small memorial service organized by Jashaun’s Buddhist temple was held on a sunny Saturday morning in Promontory Point in Hyde Park. According to Jashaun’s will, he wanted his ashes to be scattered across Lake Michigan.

As waves crashed onto the lake’s shore, and the sound of seagulls flying mixed in with children laughing and playing in a small park nearby, a Buddhist priest holding Jashaun’s bronze urn open the lid and began to recite a passage from a Buddhist book of scriptures…

“Life is a journey. Death is a return to earth. The universe is like an inn. The passing years are like dust. Regard this phantom world as a star at dawn, a bubble in a stream, a flash of lightning in a summer cloud, a flickering lamp – a phantom – and a dream.”

Sniffles and slight cries from the small crowd huddled together harmonized with the wisps of air sojourning through the sky. The Buddhist priest walked near a cliff and began pouring the ashes into the air, letting the invisible streams take away the remnants of Jashaun.

Gemini, with his arm wrapped around Tasia’s shoulders, consoled her as she wiped her face of a few tears that trickled from the corners of her eyes. Jasmine was there, completely devastated. Her sobs grew

louder and louder as the Buddhist priest finished releasing Jashaun's ashes into the vast blue lake. Her husband too was consoling her.

A few of Jashaun's former co-workers, former clients he'd helped at the different crisis centers he worked at over the years, close friends and far distant relatives were in attendance of the memorial. One of his former clients – a tall, slim and young looking black guy cleared his throat and began to sing a song in dedication to Jashaun. It was an acapella rendition of Missy Elliot's "Take Away".

"You're so incredible ever since the day we became so personal. Every day that I spend with you it gets unforgettable. Anything that I did with you, I don't regret at all. I love everything about you."

After the service concluded, a small repast was being held at a banquet hall nearby. As a few volunteers from the Buddhist temple began serving a selection of vegetarian food, Jasmine eventually made her way to Tasia seated at a table with Gemini and TJ.

"Tasia…Tasia Johnson…" Jasmine smiled, but a bit uncomfortable, however she didn't want to be rude and not at least say anything and acknowledge her. Tasia smiled back and stood up from her seat. She kept nervously grinning until Jasmine opened her mouth and said, "Well, give me a hug cousin!!!"

As the two embraced, Tasia's eyes watered up. "Wow, you have changed… A lot!" Tasia exclaimed once she released her embrace from Jasmine. "Shoot, you have too! Look at you girl! Oh my god! Your mother would've been so proud of you!"

As soon as Jasmine uttered a mention of her mother, Tasia's face turned flat, and Jasmine immediately recognized it was a little early to start rekindling memories, "Oh, no, no, Tasia. I'm sor—" She clutched her mouth. "Please forgive me… Please, let's talk in private."

"Ok," Tasia agreed as Jasmine grabbed her by her hand and walked her off to a distant table from everyone else so the two could talk by themselves.

"If you will, and please, you don't have to accept it, and I completely understand, but I am so sorry for everything, and I mean EVERYTHING my so-called mother, I and Jashaun ever did to you. I know Jashaun did his best to try to make his peace with you, and he truly meant it. For years, he'd always talk about you and how he wanted to make everything right. We were so young and stupid, so stupid, and I mean it from my heart, I apologize."

Tasia's eyes reddened and turned puffy hearing the apology, "I forgive you. You all were young. And your mother put bad thoughts in your heads. I am still trying to heal myself, but I know it will take time…"

"Yes, trust me, I live with what we did to you every day…" Jasmine continued sobbing, shaking her head, ashamed she was that

type of fucked up conniving person years ago.

The two continued to talk, and as they wrapped up their conversation, talking about their careers and families, it was time for Tasia to switch gears and ask what she'd been wanting to ask from the very beginning of the conversation.

"Jasmine, I just have one thing to ask you, and I don't want you to get upset. Gemini thinks I'm a bit crazy for asking this, but I think it's probably important for you to know…Well, Jashaun, the day before he died when I finally got a chance to visit him…Well, right before he started having breathing problem I think…I think he knew Darnisha is still alive…"

"Wh-wwhat?" Jasmine scrunched her face up in confusion. "I-I-II—I don't think that makes any sense. We haven't heard or seen her in years, and one of the police detectives investigating her case told me the longer her disappearance, the more likely it is she was dead. Besides, you know she was messing with that corrupt cop that did that crazy stuff to you…And he's dead too. The police told me she probably was kidnapped by a drug dealer or something…"

"I know… Trust me, I know. But Jashaun…He knew something. He was going to say something. The words were about to roll right off his tongue. I just know it…"

"I don't know, Tasia. It just seems a bit unlikely. I wish she was alive, because I have some words for that evil bitch myself, pardon my language. What she did to you, me and Jashaun is beyond explainable, and the truth is, I hate the fact that she's dead, that is if she is truly dead because she deserves to be in prison."

Tasia huffed and exhaled. "I'm glad you and I are on the same page about this. Anyway, let's get back to our families. I can see Gemini over there giving me that look that he's not enjoying this vegan food," Tasia chuckled. "Oh yeah, trust me girl, I know. My husband is straight from the woods. This tempeh and soy shit is for the birds…"

Tasia pulled out a handkerchief from her purse and wiped Jasmine's face. "I'm so glad you became the woman you are. I hope we can have a real cousin relationship now…"

"Really?" Jasmine's eyes widened when Tasia said that. "Really!" The two hugged. "In fact, I don't live too far away from here. How about you, Blake and the kids come by and I can cook us dinner. We have so much catching up to do."

"Oh my God! I'd appreciate that!

Jasmine and Tasia got up from their table and made their way back to their families. Once they left the repast, as promised Jasmine and her family headed over to Tasia and Gemini's house, and they spent the rest of the day, getting to know each other as family again.

Chapter Fifty-Five

The following day Tasia and Jasmine decided they were going to head down to the hospice center together and help clean out Jashaun's room. The goal was to sort through his belongings and figure out what exactly needed to be thrown away and what could be donated. Their husbands stayed behind and watched some Sunday football while they baby sat.

Once the two cousins made their way to the hospice center, and inside Jashaun's room, they didn't hesitate to start immediately cleaning up the room. It was pretty crazy for Tasia though to see this now grown-up Jasmine clean. When they'd live together, that girl barely lifted a broom, but now here she was, swishing a broom around the hospice room like it was 1957 and she was hired help for Miss Daisy or some other old racist white bitch.

Jashaun was a minimalist. Guess because when he became a practicing Buddhist, he realized he didn't need much other than the clothes on his back, his religious studies books and his meditation beads. Tasia and Jasmine decided to take his books and donate them to the new library that was going to be inside the new Marcia's House community center. They were going to donate his clothes to a local salvation Army.

"Oh, looks like we almost forgot that box of shoes up in the corner," Jasmine said as she still swiped the floor with the brush, ensuring there was not a speckle of dust to be found. Tasia waltzed over to the closet and pulled down an Payless shoe box. "Damn, are there shoes in here?" Tasia joked, sensing how light the box was. But once she shook the box around she quickly realized there weren't shoes in there. She opened the box and saw a collection of greeting cards, many of them still in envelopes, unopened. "Oh, there are greeting cards. I never understood why people collect these anyways…" Tasia laughed.

"Yeah, girl. I tell Blake all the time to throw that shit away. I do not like cards all over my fridge. After a while it just looks messy."

"Hah! I know right. You ain't lyin'! Shoot, I guess that runs in the family!" Tasia snickered once more. "But man, a lot of these cards

look the same. It's like these cards are from the same person. And they have horrible taste. Gosh these are ugly!" Tasia screwed her up at the cheap, ugly greeting cards. Shit, she figured, if you're gonna send someone a nice holiday card, at least spend a little money on them so they'd be memorable.

"Girl, let me see…" Jasmine asked as she put the broom off to the side and walked over to Tasia. Tasia handed Jasmine the box and she started reading some of the cards… "Spiritual harvest season is upon us, sow your seed of faith, and God will show out with his bountiful crops of miracles. Be encouraged and have faith in the blood of the lamb, Evangelist & First Lady Belinda Bishop-Duke…"

Jasmine rolled her eyes… "You know, I go to church back in Tulsa. All the time, but this lady right here sounds like a phoney. Heifer just sounds like one of those slimey preachers on TBN always asking for money."

"Yeah, I know girl…Gemini and I don't really go. We're spiritual," Tasia smiled.

"Oh, here's another one…From EVANGELIST & First Lady Belinda Bishop-Duke…God can, God will. Smite out your destiny. Be encouraged and have faith in the blood of the lamb…"

As Jasmine rumbled through the shoe box collection, she quickly realized all the cards were from the same Evangelist, and something started to disturb her. "This just doesn't make any sense. Jashaun was a Buddhist. He wouldn't dare tolerate this. Who in the hell is this lady?!?"

"Lemme see…" Tasia grabbed the box out of Jasmine's hands and started reading the cards herself. "Do you mind?" She asked Jasmine and she was about to open up one of the envelopes still sealed.

She opened up the card that had a picture of a big megachurch on it. Once she opened up the envelope, a check slipped out. Tasia kneeled down and picked up the check. Tasia's brow raised in shock. "$2,000 made out to Jashaun Johnson… From Dr. Charles and Belinda Duke."

"What?!? Let me see…" Jasmine, somewhat angered now, snatched the check from Tasia's hand and looked at it. Without saying a word, as silence engulfed the room, their body language suggested they both were thinking the same thing.

Suddenly Jasmine threw the box on a dresser, grabbed a bunch of unopened envelopes and handed half to Tasia, "Here, you open these, I"ll open the rest."

Following her command, Tasia and Jasmine quickly opened the envelopes, pulled out the cards and once they opened them to read the message, they each contained a check made out to Jashaun from Charles and Belinda Bishop in the same amount…$2,000.

Jasmine collapsed to the floor, and the second Tasia saw her cousin damn near about to black out, she lunged towards her and helped her up before she hurt herself. Jasmine then began to wail and sob the loudest cry, echoing all throughout the room and down the hall. “Come on, Jasmine, come on. Just be calm about this. Let’s not overreact. We gotta make sure it’s her.”

“HOW! HOW COULD SHE DO THIS TO US! TO YOU! TO ME! TO JASHAUN!” Jasmine screamed, with her eyes instantly turning dragon red and her nose runny.

“It’s gotta be her! Who else sends a Buddhist dying from cancer $2,000!?!?!? TASIA! I AM GOING TO KILL THAT BITCH. I JUST LOST MY MUTHAFUCKIN’ CHRISTIANITY. I AM GOING TO MURDER THAT BITCH! AHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHH!”

Jasmine was going fucking crazy. She was throwing her hands all over the place, having the epic nervous breakdown of her life once she’d realize her mother wasn’t dead – that bitch was very much still alive, and well at that. And worse, she was living under a fake, fraudulent identity, purporting to be an evangelist down in Florida. Tasia never would’ve thought in a million years would be the way she’d ultimately find out the truth about the manipulative, maniacal demonic hoe.

Like Jasmine, she too had it in her to wanna go pop that cum guzzling bitch in her skull during the middle of “church” service so everyone could see their First Lady was not who they thought she was.

Chapter Fifty-Six

A week later…

As usual, it was hot as hell as the scorching sun blasted the humid swamps of Belle Glade, Florida with rays of blistering heat. It was so hot outside, you could fry chicken in your sweat. Nonetheless the blazing temperatures didn't hinder the thousands of dressed up parishioners to show up and show out for Evangelist First Lady Belinda Bishop's Women's Day celebration. This jubilant festivity for the holy women of God, covered in the blood of Jesus, also coincided with First Lady's installment as a Prophetess of the church.

Women dressed in all white with matching big feathered hats adorning their crowns made their way into the sanctuary of the newly constructed Holy Ghost Power Tabernacle. They filled the pews, ready to hear the man of God, Apostle and Prophet Dr. Charles Duke along with his now wife of ten years, First Lady Evangelist Prophetess Belinda Bishop Duke.

They were consecrated by the Lord to be the overseers of the biggest megachurch in this part of Florida. Black folks from all over south central Florida flocked to their temple every Sunday, eager to get their praise on. First Lady Belinda Bishop was seated near the altar, dressed in all white just like her church members. Except what made her stand out from everyone else was her church hat – it had to be the biggest and loudest. Typical for cocky, flamboyant first ladies who thought their pussies tasted like manna and milk straight from heaven.

As more and more people flooded the church, including Tasia and Jasmine, they sat among congregants, looking unsuspecting. After figuring out that Darnisha was still alive, not dead, and alive down in Florida getting her preach on, they had to see for themselves in person if this fuckery was really true. And it was…The moment they got comfortable in their seats in the back the church, the pair attached their vengeful eyes onto Evangelist Prophetess Belinda Bishop aka Aunt Darnisha aka the infamous gutter hoe bitch from the South Side of Chicago.

As the church service began to kick into gear, Tasia and Jasmine, both loaded, armed and fucking dangerous, were ready to up the poles from their purses and light this Evangelist Bishop bitch up front of everyone…Jasmine even for a second thought about lighting up the punk ass pastor for even being married to this trifling bitch for ten years.

Tasia had in her possession Gemini's gold Desert Eagle and

Jasmine was holding a Glock on her. After the church patrons got situated, and one of the church secretaries ran through some announcements, First Lady got up and moved to the altar. “Praise the Lawd everybody! I SAID PRAISE THE LAWD EVERYBODY! It’s Women’s Day! And we got much praisin’ to the Lord to do!”

The church audience erupted in cheers, clapping, and shouting all types of amens and hallelujahs. “Anybody just feel like givin’ Gawhdt the praise and a little glory, make ya way down. We finna sing this ooooooooooooooooooold time church song. Come on nah! Lemme get some young peepah down here! Come on Brother Perkins. Come on Sister Rose…COME ON DOWN HERE!”

Tasia’s mouth dropped in shock to see that Darnisha wasn’t just sitting on the sidelines like she first presumed. No – this bitch was really playing the part. This bitch was really acting like she was saved, sanctified, and filled with the holy ghost. Tasia had so many questions running through her mind as she observed a ratchet who used to pop pills, scam banks, and fuck scores of men suddenly get transformed into a First Lady Prophetess gospel singer.

First Lady took a sip of water from a massive gold chalice sitting on the rostrum, and then as the piano picked up the tune along with the organist, Vickie Winans’ “Long As I got King Jesus” started blaring from the instruments.

“HOW MANY OF YA’LL BEEN LIED ON? BEEN ‘BUSED? BEEN SCORNED? THE DEVIL IS A LIAR!”

As the piano started playing faster, First Lady cleared her throat, “I’ve been lied on, cheated, talked about, mistreated, I’ve been used, scorned, talked about sore as bone. I’ve been UP!, down, ALMOST TO THE GROUND! AHHH! But long as I got Kang Jesus, long as got Kang Jesus, LONG, LONG, LONG as I got him I don’t need nobody else.”

First Lady Darnisha kept singing as the parishioners erupted and sang in unison. These country ass church goin’ folk had their hands waving in the air. Old ladies were jumping up and down in excitement. This Evangelist bitch was truly working the crowd. She was shouting, screaming, sounding just like she was Vickie Winans her damn self. With that outlandish ass church hat she was wearing, she definitely could pass for a gospel singer about to drop a new album.

“HE”S JEHOVAH JIREH, RAFFAAA, NISSAAA!” Prophetess Darnisha screamed in joy as the piano player and drummer thumped the holy ghost music away.

Minutes later, as the song seemed to wind down, suddenly the song turned into a massive praise break, of course led by Darnisha herself. Down in the middle of the crowd, First Lady was going crazy, rapidly tapping her feet against the royal purple carpet like she was Sammy Davis Jr. or some shit.

“HALLEILUJAH! GLORAAAY! GLORAAAY!” Danrisha waved her hands in the air, speaking in tongues, damn near foaming at the mouth. Tasia looked and Jasmine. They were ready to make the move. They waited for Evangelist scamming bitch to make her way back to seat so she could catch her breath, and then they’d catch her fake holy hoe ass by surprise.

Tasia whipped out her cell phone and sent someone a text message. Three seconds later…

PLOW!

“FBI! EVERYONE GET YOUR HANDS DOWN! DARNISHA JOHNSON, STAY STILL! YOU ARE UNDER ARREST!” An army of FBI, ATF and DEA agents along with police from neighboring West Palm Beach County stormed the sanctuary of Holy Ghost Power Tabernacle, instantly catching everyone by surprise, even “Belinda”. Clasping her chest, she looked around – the bitch was so thoroughly confused as to what was happening, and for a second she forgot her real birth name was Darnisha Johnson.

The army of law enforcement agents, with AK-47 rifles in their hands aimed at the rostrum, stomped and thundered to the altar to detain Darnisha Johnson. Despite police investigators back in Chicago writing her off as dead, if somehow she’d show up as alive and caught, she was going to be arraigned on a vast number of charges, so many why bother even list them out. While most of the parishioners ducked and hid, cautious not to glance at the vast army of law enforcement agents and police officers wielding their guns, ready to kill if they had to, Tasia and Jasmine stood up with brazen confidence and made their way towards Darnisha. Her husband, Pastor Duke, held his hands up too in confusion, wondering if he was being arrested as well. “Not you sir – HER!” one of the agents said to the Prophet of God and leader of the church. He looked at his wife, shock and awe overtaking him. His mouth dropped to the ground and his eyes amplified in bewilderment. “Darnisha Johnson?” he lowly muttered. “Darnisha Johnson, put your hands behind your back! You’re under arrest for three counts of…” The FBI agent kept going down a list of crimes Darnisha had committed hearing those charges roll of the FBI agents tongue, Pastor Duke knew right then and there his wife of ten years was not the woman who she said she was. The lie was pulled back. Everything he’d assumed about her was wrong. Dead wrong. The woman who he thought all these years was an unfortunate victim of sex trafficking ring turned out to be a low life scummy gutter bitch named Darnisha Johnson. A bitch wanted for bank fraud, murder, child abuse, sex trafficking – all the crazy shit you could think of.

As the agent finally cuffed Darnisha and walked her off the rostrum and up the aisle towards the church’s exit, Tasia and Jasmine

lunged towards Darnisha. The moment she saw her daughter and niece, she trembled and began to cry. She just shook her head and lowered it. There were so many things they wanted to say. But what was the point. The didn't know this woman anymore. Jasmine almost fixed her mouth to wanna cuss her out, but she just stood there, frozen. This was all too surreal to her. Seeing her mother made her realize she was glad Tahmir sent her to boot camp . In him doing that, she learned he was more the father and mother she ever needed in those months. She counted it as a blessing Tahmir hauled her ass to boot camp. Deep down inside, she wished he'd gotten to Jashaun sooner, and maybe he'd be alive too. Just maybe.

As parishioners looked around confused, stunned their first lady was a fraudster, they made their way outside the church and watched their First Lady get stuffed in the back of a squad car and get hauled off. The thick, growing crowd lowly chirped gossip outside. Tasia and Jasmine waltzed outside, satisfied with how everything happened. They could've killed her. They were prepared to. But they had too much to lose. Dedicated, loyal and respectable men that loved them. Smart children. A house. Money in their bank accounts. Degrees. More importantly – they had discipline and self-respect. Everything that Darnisha lacked. Darnisha is what happens when you have gutter hoe dreams.

Chapter Fifty-Seven

Two months later…

"I can't believe this bitch doesn't even have the fucking gall to at least acknowledge us. Won't even look at us and give us eye contact…" Jasmine whispered, sitting in the back of the court room next to an observant Tasia. This was the moment the two cousins had been waiting for since Darnisha got caught and arrested. It was a Tuesday early afternoon, and they sat idly listening to the judge finally hand down his sentencing to Darnisha.

"…The jury having hereby returned a verdict of guilty of all seventy two counts leveled against the defendant has required the court to sentence Ms. Darnisha Johnson to serve seventy two life sentences consecutively. I hereby order you to be committed to the Illinois Department of Corrections effectively."

SMACK! The stern, gray haired old as dirt white judge smacked his heavy long dark brown gavel against his bench. Once he delivered his sentencing, he closed the manila folder in his hand, sat up from his seat and swiftly made his way out the courtroom to his chambers. After being captured and immediately extradited back to Chicago, the Cook County prosecutors' office wasted no time in processing Darnisha's case. However, rather than go to trial, Darnisha ironically decided to go ahead and plead guilty to all her crimes and so she could go straight to prison.

It was pretty fucked up though. The bitch was so quick to plead guilty to all the charges leveled against her – murder, child abuse, sex trafficking, bank fraud, identity theft, etc. But she didn't even have the courtesy of at least granting her remaining "family" members the opportunity to speak with them and offer an apology or at least try to explain herself and why she did what she did. Every time Tasia and Jasmine tried to go to the jail where she was being temporarily detained, Darnisha refused their visits. Sadly, she even refused visits from her now ex-husband, Pastor Duke.

In fact, out of all the people in the courtroom today, he was the only one who reeked being heartbroken. By the light sobs emanating from his mouth as the judge threw the book at Darnisha, it was obvious to Tasia and Jasmine he was still so disordered about everything that seemed to have happened so suddenly and unexpectedly. To him, this was all just a nightmare; an unspeakable and unbelievably horrendous hallucination he'd eventually sober up from, and then laugh it off and continue on with their Christian ministry. Distress couldn't even describe what overwhelmed him.

Pastor Duke really believed and just knew deep down in his heart and soul Darnisha, or "Belinda" was a saved and changed woman, and she indeed was called by God to save souls in the world.

The courtroom was barely packed. The only people obviously interested in the case were Tasia, Darnisha, the prosecutors, the public defender, judge and of course Pastor Duke. Darnisha, wearing a bright orange jumpsuit, sat up and turned her attention towards the exit of the courtroom. With thick metal handcuffs binding her wrists and ankles, Darnisha began to make her way through the exit of the courtroom with two police courthouse officers by her side. As she solemnly slogged her way up the center aisle of the courtroom, Pastor Duke's continued faint wailing mixed in with the clinking of the chains binding Darnisha to her fate. As she passed Pastor Duke, she couldn't even muster up the courage to even give him any eye contact. He did though, wiping his face free of his tears of grief. He came to the bittersweet conclusion his wife of ten years, the woman he loved unconditionally, as he thought she loved him the same, never really existed.

As Darnisha eventually made her way towards the exit of the courtroom, she quickly glanced at Jasmine and Darnisha. Her eyes turned to slits, and then quickly threw her gaze back to the double door exit. And just like that, she was gone…again. Except this time, she wasn't dead. She was very much alive and was going to spend the rest of her wretched ratchet existence rotting away in a prison in southern Illinois.

~

"Aiight girl, well, call me when you make it back to Tulsa… You and Blake are welcome to stay with me and Gemini anytime!" Tasia's smile stretched across her rejoicing face as she gave her cousin a tight hug in the parking garage attached to the courthouse. "Awwww girl, thank you! I sure will. I got some time coming up anyways. Maybe when I come back into town, you can help me lose some of this weight," Jasmine laughed as she squeezed her tummy.

"Ha! Shit, I need to lose mines too!" Tasia responded. The two of them looked at each other, and then took a huge breath of relief in unison. "I can't believe all of this, Tasia… But she's gone. Is it bad though that I don't feel like she truly got what she deserves?"

"Yeah, well, it is what it is, right? At least we can know she's not out there hurting anyone anymore…" Tasia responded. Out the corner of her right eye she caught a glance of Pastor Duke making his way to his maroon Cadillac rental. "Speaking of which, there goes Pastor Duke right there. You think I should say something to him?" Tasia

asked. Jasmine shrugged her shoulders. “You can have it. I have a plane to catch. I’ll text you when I get to the airport.”

“Ok, girl…” As Jasmine hopped in her rental, Tasia quickly sauntered through the parking garage trying to catch up with Pastor Duke. “Hey, Charles… I mean Pastor Duke!” Tasia called out, waving to get his attention.

He turned around and produced a somewhat fake grin. “Hi…Tasia, right?”

Finally catching up with him, she reached her hand out to shake his… “Yes, Tasia Johnson…”

He lowered his head and huffed, “Yeah…The niece, right?” He produced another slightly fake smirk.

“Yessir…” Silence engulfed the two for a moment. “Listen, Pastor… If there is anything you need from me. If you want to talk or get more information about everything, I am always here to help.”

“Yeah, thanks for the kind gesture. But there’s nothing else I need to discuss about this matter. You have a nice life, child of God. Keep him first.” And with that, without even allowing Tasia to offer more consolation, he jetted straight to his rental, got in, and started up the car.

Tasia, confused, rolled her eyes and raised her brow. That was a bit rude, but she quickly understood Pastor Duke was all types of fucked up on the inside. “Ohhhhh-k…That was strange, but oh well…” She turned around and paced herself back to her car. She whipped out her phone and checked her e-mail since phones weren’t permitted inside the courthouse.

POW!

Tasia gasped and her reading eyes amplified in terror of what sounded like to her an explosive gunshot blast echoing throughout the parking garage. Given her close proximity to Pastor Duke’s rental, she instantly knew the sound came from his car. She spun on her pumps and dashed towards her rental, and within seconds her investigative pupils latched onto the thick coat of blood splattered across the driver’s side window. “PASTOR DUKE! OH MY GOD!” Tasia lunged towards the driver’s side door, and the second she opened it, Pastor Duke’s lifeless body slumped out, almost falling to the cold parking garage’s ground. Tasia gasped and clasped her mouth as she gawked down at the sight of half of Pastor Duke’s head blown off. Chunks of chitlin-looking brain jelly and cherry red blood sprayed across the front seats, dashboard and windshield. Tasia peered inside the still running car and saw the long barrel of a shotgun wedged between the steering wheel and the driver’s seat.

“What’s was that noise?” A curious young white woman asked Tasia and the second she saw Pastor Duke’s lifeless body and head

oozing blood to the ground she screamed her life away. Tasia dialed 911 and called for police and EMTs to come to the scene. Once they arrived, they hauled off Pastor Duke's body to a morgue, eventually to be shipped off back to Florida. For the next two hours or so, Tasia stayed behind to answer any questions police officers on scene had about the suicide.

"This is just crazy. Why'd you think he did this?" A Latino police officer asked Tasia as he seemed to be wrapping up his myriad of questions.

"Well that's hard to say…I mean, shit, I don't know what was truly going on his head." Tasia shrugged her shoulders. She continued, "But let me ask you, and don't take this wrong way. But what would you do if the woman you were married to for ten years turned out to be a murderous psychopathic whore and con artist who framed an innocent man by paying a convicted serial rapist to rape your son and give him AIDS? And then you also smother your infant baby son to death and sell off your niece to a serial killer? Once the law is after you, you escape down to Florida and become a preacher and marry you…"

The officer's mouth flung down to the gray garage ground and his beady gaze widened in shock. Absolutely silent, he didn't know how to retort Tasia's horrid and somewhat callous statement…Then the reality of what she said hit him in the face… "I'd kill myself…"

"Exactly," Tasia raised her brow and bit her lip. "Can I leave now? My husband is worried about me."

"Sure…"

Once Tasia made it back to her car, she sped out of the courthouse parking garage, racing to get back her home and family. While driving, she shot Jasmine a quick text letting her know happened and to give her a call once she got off the plane. The minute she arrived back home, she stormed inside her townhouse and took her ass straight to her bathroom and took the hottest shower she'd ever taken before in her life. She needed the steamy, scorching water to take her mind off the sight of Pastor Duke's head blown away into pieces.

As millions of beads of hot Lake Michigan water rushed from her showerhead and massaged her neck and back, with her eyes closed, Tasia still couldn't fathom why he'd stoop that low and blow his life away. Wasn't he supposed to be a committed man of God? Doesn't the Bible talk about everyone having to go through trials and tribulations? Doesn't the Bible talk about suicide being a grave sin? But then instantly Tasia reminded herself she too once found herself in a similar dark rough patch, and she too attempted suicide. She realized she wasn't in any place to judge. Pastor Duke chose to deal with his situation the best way he saw fit. Unfortunately for him no one was

there to rescue and root for him like Gemini did. Tasia turned off the shower, threw on her pajamas and made her way to the kitchen where she saw Gemini and TJ watching a rerun of Family Matters. She cracked open a bottle of wine, poured herself a glass and made her way to the living room to join her family. She smiled and thanked God for Gemini and TJ. She had much to live for, unlike Pastor Duke…

Chapter Fifty-Eight

Two months later...

"Aye, yo, you ready for this?" A tall, dark as midnight prison guard, resembling a fuglier version of Wesley Snipes stood off alone in the shaded corner of a prison gym, his beady jaundiced eyes observing a bunch of butch ass females pump iron. "Ugly ass hoes," he chuckled as he puffed on a Newport, holding a paper bag under his armpit.

"Ay yo, Erika!" the same shady prison guard shouted, trying to get the attention of one of the butch prison bitches working out with fury. Once she heard the prison guard bark her name from across the workout floor, she put the 45-pound dumbbells she was just curling back on the weight rack and dashed over to the menacing Officer Hawkins.

"Sup…" Erika looked down at the paper bag Officer Hawkins suddenly rushed into her grip, so she could hide it from view of other prisoners possibly snooping on their brief convo. "Everything in there?" she asked without even bothering to open the bag and examine its contents.

"Yeah… It's going down in three minutes, so be ready to go to work. And make sure she still breathing. Home girl doesn't want her dead."

"Bet…" Erika then dashed back off into another part of the gym, joining in a conversation with some other inmates who looked more occupied talking about their hair and nails rather than their exercise routines.

The prison's gym was outdoors, and every day from 10 am to 1 pm, inmates had the opportunity to go outside to workout and congregate while breathing fresh air and getting their vitamin D levels up in the sun. Darnisha, although she wasn't really about that workout life, used the opportunity to get a whisk of fresh air and to feel the rays of sunshine warm and tan the skin on her yellow forehead. She also loved going outside to meet up with her prayer group.

Since being in prison, Darnisha quickly found herself in the throes a tight circle of friends. Her new comrades were also fellow Christians looking to maintain their sanity and righteousness behind these vast, impenetrable prison walls at Jacksonville Correctional Center. Still believing in word, holding onto God's unchanging hand, "Minister" Darnisha still considered herself a righteous woman. Since the day she was captured and sent back to Chicago, although she knew she'd done much wrong in her life, to her that woman no longer existed. She was still very much Prophetess Belinda, and she wanted her prayer warrior

buddies to call her just that.

It was crazy she'd still stuck with the identity. She had to because in fact in a few more months, she was going to be delivering her baby son, Jacob Elijah. Although Pastor Duke committed suicide the day she was arrested, the tragic thing was she never got the opportunity to tell him about her pregnancy. She actually kept it as a surprise, but her plan to surprise Pastor Duke with an announcement party was thwarted the day she got arrested.

Darnisha, or "Belinda" wrestled with knowing just how difficult it was going to be for her to deliver her baby and then give him up for adoption. Nonetheless, she was determined to make sure as Jacob got older, he would know who his mother was and he would hopefully, by the grace of God, have a relationship with her despite her being locked up and never being able to see the outside again.

"Father God we come to right now asking you bring healing to this woman's body, oh Lord. We know that you are the alpha and the omega. You are the one who has power and dominion over all. We ask that you smite out this demon of ovarian cancer from Sister Patrice, oh Holy Lord. In your name, we pray. Amen." Darnisha finished giving her prayer of deliverance as everyone in the circle held each other's hands, eyes closed, hoping Minister Belinda's prayerful words would beckon the holy spirit to come among the group and heal Sister Patrice's body from her stage three ovarian cancer.

As usual, right after their circle prayer, the women began to sing and chant. "This little light of mine, I'm gonn—" All of a sudden the women's singing were interrupted.

POW! POW! POW!

Tiny explosions echoed through the somewhat crowded open gym space. Within seconds the entire space was covered in thick plumes of purple smoke. Three minutes earlier, Officer Hawkins gave GiGi, another prisoner, the nod to get the party muhfuckin' crackin'. Erika, who earlier got a bag of smoke bomb fireworks from Officer Hawkins, passed GiGi a bunch of them along with a lighter. Once she lit them up, within seconds the balls exploded and flew all over the place, creating a trail of thick clouds. Surprised and anxious inmates already knew what time it was. It was about to be a big ass riot, and they needed to get cover quickly or else they were about to get caught the fuck up.

Word went around that some Gangster Disciple inmates, seeking revenge for one of their own who got stabbed to death months earlier, were about to fuck up some Neo-Nazis who they believed were involved in the murder. Yells and screaming from inmates filled the smoky outdoor gym as the clouds of smoke seemed to not dissipate. Darnisha and her friends soon tried to take cover, but as inmates tried

to fight their way through the plumes of smoke to seek refuge, Darnisha found herself lost and confused. A few inmates told her to always be aware of crazy shit like this, and in the event it went down, she needed to do her best to take cover somewhere, especially considering she was pregnant.

Meandering through the thick clouds as she covered her mouth and continuously waved her hands to get visibility through the plumes of smoke, a frantic Darnisha tried her best to find her way to the exit of the gym. With the clashing sound of fists, kicks, weights and screams penetrating Darnisha's ears, she quickly prayed in her mind she was feet away from safety.

POW! POW! Smoke bombs went off again, and the clouds grew denser like cement blocks. Darnisha stood still for moment, petrified, her dire thoughts scampering over which direction she should run. Then all of a sudden the thick purplish-blue cloud before her parted, and there appeared Erika holding a huge bowie knife in her hand. "Welcome to hell, bitch! And I'm Satan!" Erika growled.

Darnshia's eyes enlarged in fear and extreme anxiety, and before she could make a dash for cover, another inmate ran up behind her and gripped her into a damn near deadly chokehold. Darnisha kicked, screamed and threw her hands all over the place, but her pleas were drowned out by the continued loud clashing of other inmates fighting in the small race war happening on the grounds of the gym. In one swooping motion, Erika sliced the knife across Darnisha's stretched out baby occupied belly. "NOO! NO! AHHH!" Darnisha screamed as the sharp blade tore into her stomach flesh. The other female inmate, who still had Darnisha in the chokehold, suddenly subdued her to the ground. Erika then ripped open her shirt, popping the blue denim long sleeved shirt's buttons all over place. Then without a fucking care in the world she took more deep hack at Darnisha' womb until the huge, gaping gash exposed Jacob Elijah sleeping and sucking his miniature thumb in his sac.

Erika swooped down, and with her bare hands, the crazy psychotic serial killer bitch who was serving three life sentences for killing her children, ripped Jacob Elijah out of Darnisha's abdomen. As the other inmate held down Darnisha to watch the horror movie play out before her frightened eyes, Erika violently threw the baby against the concrete ground. And then here was the climax of Darnisha's real life prison horror movie, the deranged psycho bitch looked at Darnisha, smiled, and then crushed the baby with her Timbs.

Erika kept stomping on the fetus like she was stepping on an army of section 8 apartment cockroaches. Erika, and then other inmate that dashed, and disappeared into the dithering cloud, smoke and off into a getaway already mapped out Officer Hawkins. The prison's riot

response team within seconds flooded the gym floor, “EVERYONE GET DOWN NOW!” they screamed in unison holding shields, pointing AR-15s, into the thick crowd of inmates lying on the ground.

“GET MEDICAL IN HERE ASAP!” One of the response team’s officers screamed once he laid his eyes on Darnisha, on the ground, trembling and crying uncontrollably. As her cut open stomach oozed blood everywhere, life was slipping from her quickly. She could feel herself getting tired, cold and dizzy by the microsecond. Seconds later, EMTs flooded the prison gym floor, picked up Darnisha and threw her motionless, almost lifeless body onto a gurney and rushed her to the prison hospital. Little Elijah Jacob’s remains, which now looked like smashed bloody Jamaican plantains, stayed behind.

~

Weeks later…

Beep. Beep. Beep. Beep. Beep. The heart rate monitor attached to Darnisha’s weakened body chirped as she lay in a prison hospital bed, her hands cuffed to its rails. Her morphine drip-induced glassy eyes peered through the dirty, slightly cracked bedroom window staring at the amethyst and orange sunset. An older black morbidly obese female nurse with a small afro waltzed into her room, “Hey Ms. Johnson, I got another round of clozapine for you, per doctor’s orders. We gon’ get that mind of yours right, don’t you worry. In a few more weeks, you gon’ be back to normal,” she smiled as she walked over with a thick and long syringe in her hand, ready to administer another three hundred milligrams of the powerful anti-psychotic medication.

It had been weeks since Darnisha was viciously attacked, damn near stabbed to death. Erika was absolutely motherfuckin’ right. That moment she went through was hell, and Erika was Satan. Seeing her baby ripped out of her and crushed to death looped over in her mind so much, she’d lost all cognition and sanity. The little soul she had left in her body was ripped out of her as well, and she was ready to end it all. She tried to kill herself a few times by overdosing on the morphine drip, but to no avail, it didn’t work. The doctors were able to resuscitate her, and eventually they reduced her dosage just give her enough to subside the pain still buried in her huge stitched up gash across her stomach.

Being on suicidal watch, the prison psychiatrist ordered her to be given powerful antipsychotics everyday to stop her from doing anything else crazy. Once she recovered, the next plan was to transition her to a temporary psych ward to continue to monitor her. But shit, if the doctors truly knew Darnisha by this point was completely mindless; a fucking zombie just barely existing to drink,

eat, shit, piss and sleep, they would go ahead and make plans to keep her in the crazy house forever. She was done with – mentally and spiritually.

Officer Hawkins waltzed by the room and peered in. The older black female nurse walked out, "Hey Hawkins. What you doin' up here?" she asked.

"Ehh, nothin. Just bored on break. Actually wanted to come holla at you and see if you wanted to come out some times."

The Rasputia-lookin' ass nurse blushed, "Really?"

"Yeah, really girl. You thick in all the right places. Say though, what's ailing with the young lady in there? She gon be alright?"

The nurse rolled her eyes, "Shit, fuck no. She dun lost her motherfuckin' mind. Shit, I would too if someone did that to me. These niggas in here are crazy. I got two more years 'til retirement…"

"Haha, you funny ass hell Paulette. Anyways, let me get your number…"

"Sure thang. 708-515-9864…. Call me anytime," she then licked her lips.

He bit his lip, and looked her up and down, checking out her out her rolls. He loved him some BBWs, and although he wasn't quite too serious about digging up in Paulette's marshmallow puffy guts, he'd take her up on an offer if she was going. "Anyways, I'mma hit you up later…"

Nurse Paulette leaned in, "I gotta tell you a secret though," she whispered. "What?" Officer Hawkins leaned into her to listen to her secret…

"I eat ass," Paulette slurped, sticking out her long ball-pierced tongue. This bitch was an old freak.

Officer Hawkins snickered, "Girl, gimme ten, I'mma hit you up." He walked away and made his way down the dimly lit hospital corridor. Moments later, he pulled out his phone and quickly saved Paulette's number in his contacts list. Then he scrolled down and called the person he was looking for…Cookie.

Holding the phone up to his ear, he made his way into an empty room and closed the door. "Hello?" the woman on the other end answered.

"'Sup Cookie. It's done. She still alive. The baby is dead."

Cookie quickly scrambled to find a quiet, secure space away from her family to talk to Officer Hawkins. Once she made her way into her office, she closed the door and sat down in front of her laptop. "When it happened. Weeks ago actually. Been meaning to call you, but you know, I wanted to kind of let things simmer and see what would happen to her. She tried to off herself a couple of times, but the doctors got her on so much dope, that bitch higher than giraffe

pussy."

Cookie sniggered, "You've always been a clown ass nigga. I can't stand you." She continued, "Ok, so good. I'll wire you the money ASAP. All $100,000. Thanks again, bro. Tell wifey I said hello."

"Alright, girl. Take it easy. And tell Blake I said hello…"

"Ok, bro."

Officer Hawkins hung up the phone and sent Paulette a text.

Cookie hung up and made her way back into the kitchen of her house. "Mommy! She has your name too! JASMINE!"

"She does? Is she pretty?" Jasmine's 4-year-old daughter lunged at her, excited at hearing the young Arabian princess in the movie shared her mother's name. Jasmine picked her up and sauntered in the living room, where Blake was watching away as he read over a newspaper. "Everything alright?"

"Yeah, just taking care of some last minute business at the hospital… You all ready for dinner?"

"YEAH!" Jasmine's kids jumped in excitement.

Jasmine, or "Cookie", as she was called by her friends in boot camp since she had an addiction to girl scout cookies, knew Officer Hawkins would come through and help her – for a good price that is. When Jasmine found out her mother was pregnant, she wanted that bitch to suffer in the cruelest manner. Since Darnisha began her time in prison, Jasmine conspired to come up with so many plots and plans to torment Darnisha. Once she discovered Officer Hawkins was working as a CO in down in Jacksonville Correctional Center, she'd known he'd help her come up with the best way to get full vengeance. With the money Jashaun left her in his will, rather than use the funds for herself and family, she needed to get payback for Jashaun's death and for the way she treated Tasia. She had to.

She'd let Tasia be the pacifist, the one quick to forgive. But she wasn't willing to allow her heart to open up to that possibility. Knowing that Darnisha ruined so many lives, and that she was even still living in delusion, even still going by "Belinda", Jasmine wanted her fantasy to come to an end. It would be one thing to just kill her and the baby. But to Jasmine, that was just to easy. She wanted her to watch her baby be ripped out of her and crushed to death so she could feel the most intense anguish of her life. And surely it worked. Because Darnisha now was never ever going to come back….ever.

Epilogue

Two years later…

"Girl! Where'd you even find this place!??! I've been in Chicago all my life and I never knew this place even existed!" Tasia beamed awe the second she and Sarah walked inside ZED451's, an upscale Brazilian steakhouse in Downtown Chicago's River North neighborhood.

It was the perfect sunny Saturday afternoon in September. Today was Tasia and Gemini's five-year wedding anniversary, and Mr. McGray planned for a dinner for Mrs. McCray later that night. Sarah and Tasia decided to meet up earlier for brunch so they could talk about their business trip down to Washington, D.C. next week. They were planning on lobbying on the behalf of Marcia's House to help expand federal funding for programs that help victims of sex trafficking.

Tasia had never been to ZED451's before. She heard they had an awesome brunch, and since she was trying this new diet and today was her cheat day, she decided to get down at the restaurant at Sarah's invite. After the two ladies got situated at their table, the waiter served them mimosas and explained how the restaurant menus worked.

Once the waiter left, Sarah pulled out a manila envelope from her purse and slid it to Tasia. "What's this?" Tasia asked. Sarah sniggered, "Just open it. You always askin' questions…"

Tasia grabbed the envelope, opened it, and pulled out a letter that had a Illinois State Supreme Court letterhead stamped at the top.

~

RE: Illinois vs. Tahmir Thompkins

Dear Tasia Johnson-McCray and family,

In light of the State of Illinois v. Darnisha Johnson, a motion was filed by attorneys representing the estate of Mr. Thompkins to vacate all active charges pertaining to case no# 2523-12 filed in Cook County Criminal Circuit Court. New evidence submitted in the case has warranted the Illinois State Supreme Court to vacate all charges against the late Tahmir Thompkins.

All matters pertain to his case have been dismissed.

Best Regards,

Howard L. Zell – Chief Magistrate, Illinois State Supreme Court

Tears swelled in Tasia's eyes as she finished reading the letter. After all these long and arduous years fighting and struggling to clear Tahmir's name, a petition she filed years ago to the Illinois State Supreme Court went through and she successfully was able to get all those false charges levied against Tahmir removed.

It was a bittersweet and watershed moment for Tasia. Truth be told, this is all she ever wanted. To free the man she just didn't consider her father, but her stepfather. Getting the news was exciting and now she couldn't wait to get home to share the news with Gemini. What a perfect wedding anniversary gift. But then she quickly contemplated what her life would've been like had Tahmir still been alive. Would she have done and accomplished all the things she accomplished? Truth be told, had she not gone through what she went through, she would've never met Gemini. She would've never even had the near death experience where she was able to talk to her mother and Marcia. That alone was what gave her the push and drive to do everything she did up to this point. Went to college. Graduated from law school. Started her own family law practice and nonprofit. Helped thousands of children escape abuse and violence.

"I was saving that for you…It came in the mail yesterday. I told you to always check the mail," Sarah laughed as she wiped a tear from the corner of her eye.

"Girl, you right…Anyways, let's eat because I'm starving!" Tasia chuckled as she tried to catch the attention of their water.

About an hour passed, and the two ladies were in the midst of still eating. "Damn, girl, I want some more of that Portuguese sausage," Tasia barked, looking around the room to see if she could find the server who was waltzing around serving the spicy smoked Portuguese hotlink served with Cajun mustard.

"Shit, where is that gu—"

"Mommy! Mommy! Come with me!" It seemed like TJ dashed out of nowhere, instantly catching Tasia by surprise. Tasia looked around, perplexed…What in the hell was going on? Why was TJ here?" "What's going on?" Tasia nervously smiled as she proceeded to get out of her chair with caution. TJ, reaching out to grab his mama's hand so he could lead her somewhere, laughed, "It's a surprise, Mommy. Just come!"

Tasia looked at Sarah, and her bestie smiled and shrugged her shoulders in silence, kind of suggesting she knew something was going on. Tasia let TJ escort her to the back of the restaurant as Sarah trailed them. A minute later, they arrived at a closed door, and once TJ opened it, Tasia's eyes instantly latched onto the private banquet

area filled with familiar faces. Gemini. Papi. Jasmine and her family. Other friends and loved ones. Even Crystal, her favorite mentee, all the way from Miami. Everyone had huge smiles written across their glowing faces. Gemini, taking center of the room, walked up to Tasia, tears forming in his eyes, as he reached out to her.

"Tasia, you are an inspiring woman, amazing in so many ways. You have grown me in ways I could never imagine. I love you so much with all of my heart, and I take this moment in front of all the people we love and cherish to ask you will you renew your vows with me?" Gemini choked on his words as he continued pouring out his heart to his wife of five years.

Tasia, hearing Gemini's soulful words, clasped her mouth, tears ran down her face like lush African waterfalls. Gemini pulled out a card from his pocket handed Tasia a card. "Today is a day of servitude, which means you have to do everything I say. I am going to pass servitude onto someone else and you have to do everything they say. Go to this place and ask for that young lady, and she will tell you everything else."

"Oh my God, Gemini, I love you so much," Tasia cried as she went in and hugged Gemini.

Everyone in the crowd joyfully sobbed as they saw the extreme expression of love between the couple. "This is just too much for me," Sarah sniffled, and then dashed towards Tasia to give her a hug. "I love you girl!" Tasia exclaimed as she tightly embraced her friend.

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Following everything Gemini instructed her to do, Tasia went to ZaZa's, an upscale wedding dress boutique back down in Hyde Park. There she was fitted for an $11,000 Christian Siriano silk satin gown with a sweetheart neckline. After getting her dress, she was then instructed to go to a local hair and makeup stylist down 53rd street. Once she got a complete makeover, she was blindfolded, escorted into a black livery Cadiallac Escalade. She had no idea where she was being taken. In the car with her was Sarah and a few other female friends, all of them dressed up kind of like bride's maids.

Once they'd arrived at the destination, and she was carefully escorted through the secret outdoor location, Sarah pulled off the blindfold. Tasia damn near fell to the floor once she saw hundreds of guests, sitting in chairs, awaiting her momentous arrival. With her eyes watery, looked around her and realized she was taken to a private mansion estate out in the far suburbs. She didn't know exactly where, but the estate seemed far off and secluded from the rest of the surrounding area.

Behind her stood this massive palace-like castle that probably had at least forty or fifty bedrooms. Tasia could've swore by the looks of the house that she'd hopped on the plane and landed somewhere in Italy or France. The entire massive backyard area of the mansion where the apparent vow renewal ceremony was taking place was decked out with elaborate orange and purple linen lining outdoor props that were covered in matching floral. The slow and easy Chi-town lake breeze whisked through the countless sheets of linen, making them flow in the air. The colors were heavenly divine – matching the perfectly mystical amethyst and orange painted into the vast sky as the sun began to set.

Once the hundreds of guests saw Tasia make her entrance, everyone stood to their feet as the same eloquent singer who sung at Jashaun's wedding was sitting down at a massive white grand piano, singing that unique rendition of Aaliyah's "One In A Million" while he played the piano. With joy overwhelming her, Tasia couldn't imagine Gemini had all this planned. This was the "special surprise" he told her about earlier this week. She was enraptured endless bliss just seeing how much intricate planning he'd put into all of this.

As she continued bawling, her son TJ came up to her with a bouquet in his hand. He held the bouquet up, and she leaned downed to grab it from him. "Here, mommy. You're gonna need this so Grandpa can walk you down the aisle."

She smiled, "Where's Papi?" she asked. Once she still saw Papi standing near the gazebo, she beckoned for him to come. He smiled back to her, wiped his face of tears, and then pointed next to her.

"What?" She was confused and then once she looked to her right, her mouth flung to the ground like she'd just seen a ghost. It was Tahmir…

"WHA— AHH! AHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHH! AHHHHHHHHHH!" Tasia screamed at the top of her lungs, going crazy.

"Tasia…Baby girl…" He bawled as he opened his arms wide open to give her a hug.

"Is this…IS THIS REAL!?!? AM I DREAMING!??!? PLEASE TELL ME I AM DREAMING!"

"No…It's real. I'm here."

Tasia, forgetting she was even at her vow renewal, dropped the bouquet and lunged at Tahmir, giving him the tightest hug she'd given anyone before her life. Her crying was so ferocious and uncontrollable, you'd almost thought maybe the EMTs would've needed to be called because she was going to for sure pass out.

A few people standing by her side helped to make sure she didn't pass the fuck out and fall to the ground, ruining the dress. "Shhh,

baby girl, I know. It's alright. I know. Let's get those vows renewed, and we can talk about this all later. Right now, I wanna walk my 'daughter' down the aisle," he laughed.

Tahmir looked different. He had a thick, well groomed beard and unlike the rest of the men in attendance, he wasn't wearing a suit. He was wearing traditional African Muslim garb. She picked her bouquet back up and began to walk down the aisle as the singer continued to harmonize the Aaliyah's song. Tasia looked up to the sky, and suddenly she could see a sparkling image of her mother and Marcia appear.

"We love you, girl. We told you we got your back!" They said in unison as their voices echoed in her ears. As Tahmir escorted Tasia down the aisle, drawing closer and closer to a bawling Gemini, Tasia closed her eyes thanked God for bringing her to this moment. This was her purpose.

-THE END-

To get notified of other releases from Quan Millz, join my mailing list.

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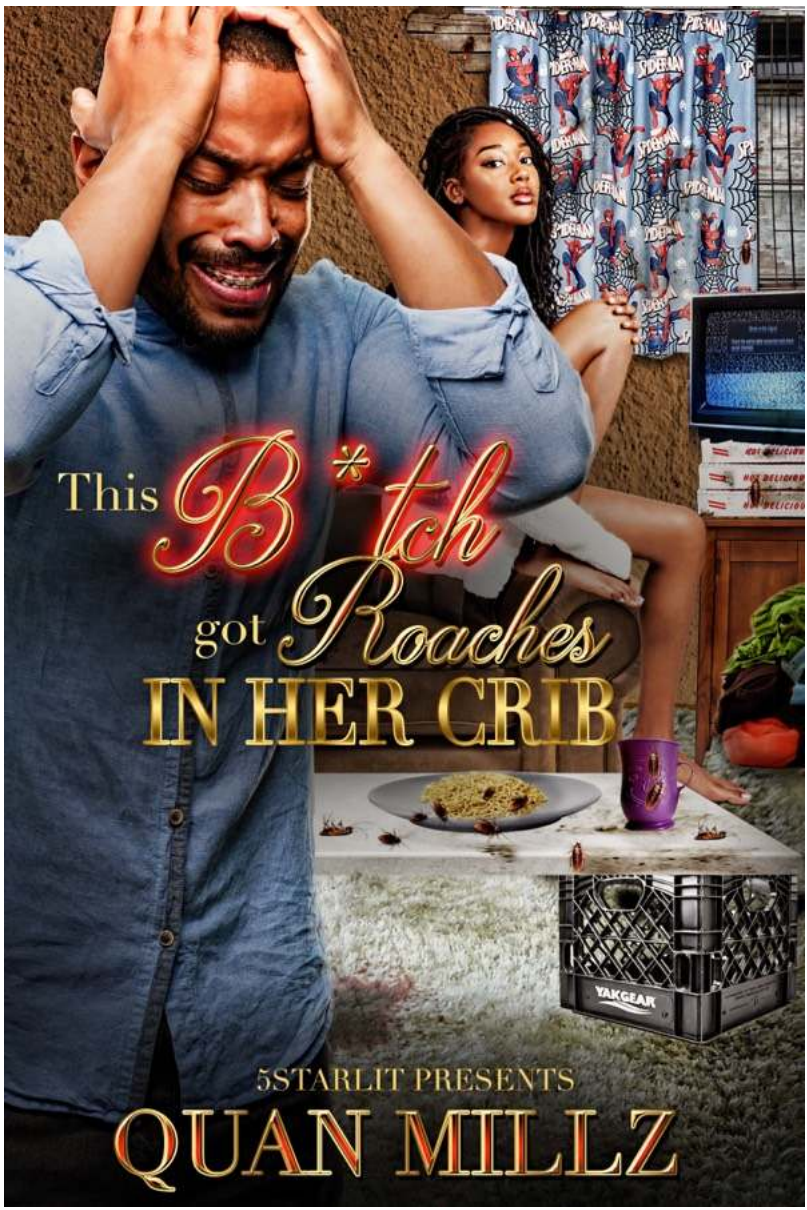
Afterword

Thank you so much for reading this series! Just a reminder, the rest of this edition contains other completed series written by me. I would appreciate if you could leave a review on just **My Baby Mama Is A Loser.** The other books already have plenty of reviews! If you have already read the other books, you can simply skip to the end to leave your review on Amazon. YOUR REVIEW MATTERS - POSITIVE OR NEGATIVE. Reviews help authors grow!

Thanks once again and I look forward to capturing your attention with other crazy, ratchet soap operas! **Stay tuned!!!**

This Hoe Got Roaches In Her Crib



Chapter One

"ALL THESE FUCKIN' ROACHES AND SHIT! AHHHHH! GOD MOTHAFUCKIN' DAMN IT!!" Fredquisha's murderous gaze was laser-focused onto five black-brownish roaches.

All ranging in sizes.

"Ughh! And a bitch ain't got time for this shit today! I'm hungry and a bitch need to get her pussy ate," the agitated section 8 strag continued to nag.

The biggest roach – Daddy Roach Sr. – embarked on a dangerous journey to lead his family to a mecca of stale food. His wings lightly flapped. He used his long, wise antennas to lead his loyal wife of thirty-two days, their two well-trained teenage sons and their precious baby daughter towards the distant smell of decaying Domino's pepperoni and sausage pizza crust hiding away in a dark corner of Fredquisha's messy apartment living room.

Every third Friday of the month when them food stamps hit her EBT card, Fredquisha usually treated her three kids to greasy pizza, saucy buffalo wings, and cinnasticks. The pizza fiesta was sort of like a food stamp renewal day of celebration. Truth be told though, the pizza was also a way to get them muhfuckin' kids temporarily off her flabby, tatted back.

Fredquisha hated to have to spend her weekends watching her "bad ass" kids, especially when she needed to get ate out and dicked down by some local ChiRaq savage. Only God knows why she was so annoyed watching them…ain't like the bitch had a job where her weekends were invaluable, deserving precious relief from a hard week of work. Every day was a fucking weekend for this hoe.

ANYWAYS…

This particular crust Daddy Roach Sr. scented had been nestled away for weeks. Shit – possibly months, out of the purview of other vermin living in the grimy apartment.

Had Fredquisha's mama taught her the importance of admiring cleanliness as a virtue, the months-old crust would've been a non-issue. Perhaps then Fredquisha would've not been staring down the critter family peacefully pilgrimaging along the hallway's dusty white

cracking baseboard.

"I swear to GOD! These mothafuckin' kids keepin' my house nasty as SHIT! They gettin' on my last damn nerves and I got shit to do today! They really gon' make me go off on they mothafuckin' asses!" Fredquisha griped under her dry, morning blunt-infused breath.

Fredquisha – better known as 'MooMoo' in the streets – positioned herself in close proximity to the migrant roach family. A bitch was ready to go to war against the critter enemies invading her living room.

Her eyes turned to homicidal slits. A butterfly of anxiety flapped its wing in her growling empty stomach. Fredquisha knew roaches were hard to motherfuckin' kill. If she was going to be victorious in offing this sneaky fuck nigga roach and his family, she needed to smite hard, so she could crush their organs, killing them on instant impact.

Fredquisha raised her right foot, leaned down and then pulled off her Wal-Mart black flip-flop. Now armed and dangerous with the $2.99 plastic flip-flop in her hand, she slowly and carefully hovered her weapon of choice over Daddy Roach Sr. His long antennas wavered side to side, unaware of Fredquisha's looming death plot.

Raised in Chicago's notorious Cabrini Green housing project high rises 'til the age of twenty, Fredquisha had no trace of fear for roaches in her body. No fear of white mice. No fear of daddy long leg spiders. Not even a trace of fear for Norwegian brown rats. Once a major problem in Chicago's slums.

Ducking and dodging at the sound of rapid gunfire was the most valuable tool any young nigga growing up in Chicago's fucked up and ultra-violent housing projects had to learn quickly. And then the next valuable housing project survival skill young niggas had to acquire was the art of killing roaches.

Fear of stray bullets aside, any child regardless of socioeconomic status starts off with an innate fear of insects, bugs and other creepy, monstrous creatures. Nonetheless, young project niggas are taught to cultivate Japanese samurai warrior-like fearlessness when it comes to living with roaches. Why? There's a 99.9999 percent chance these kids are going to be roommates with bugs until the day they leave their piss-smelling public housing residencies.

Therefore, from a tender age, young Cabrini kids got initiated into a gang of hardened roach murderers, learning how to gangbang on those muhfuckas when they encroached their set [living room, bedroom, kitchen, etc.]. So, with all that being said you already know a ghetto bitch like Fredquisha was a certified roach hitta. *Concentrate, bitch. You got it*, Fredquisha thought to herself. *Kill these fuck niggas…*

SMACK!

Daddy Roach Sr. went on to be with the Lord.

The front of his obituary read:

Homegoing Celebration For The Late Daddy Roach Sr.

Sunrise May 2018- Sunset June 2018

Rev. Dr. Lucious Roachson, III presiding…

Mama Roach, shocked and grieving, tried to flee for cover. Her three kids trailed her, but this lethal Fredquisha hoe obviously wasn't going to let them get away. They had to mothafuckin' die too and be buried next to their daddy!

"Where the fuck ya'll think ya'll goin, huh?" Fredquisha shrieked with retribution colored in her vicious words.

SMACK! SMACK! SMACK! SMACK!

Gruesome genocidal sight. An entire family wiped out.

But this was just the beginning of a growing problem…

Daddy Roach Sr. had 1,861 brothers, sisters, nieces, nephews, uncles, aunts and other relatives lurking in the cut, ready to get to that pizza crust and other discarded trash scattered throughout the cluttered and disgusting apartment.

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An unclouded Saturday morning. The first weekend in June. Chicago's South Side. The neighborhood: the infamous Englewood. A ten-unit apartment building owned by Mr. Nathaniel "Nate" Garrison, a retired, 67-year-old postal worker, stood on the corner of 63rd Street and Halsted Avenue.

Twelve years ago, after giving the United States Postal Service thirty hard, sweaty years of carrier service, the Chi-town Bronzeville native decided to dab into real estate per the advice of his younger brother Louis. The younger brother had owned some low-income rental properties throughout the predominantly black south and west sides of the city, and big bro Nate wanted to get a slice of the apparently rich and decadent rental property income pie.

Nate was hesitant at first given. He was the more fiscally conservative sibling and didn't want to fuck up his retirement coins. Nate, divorced now for nearly ten years, father of four kids, and grandfather to nine, eventually caved in and gave rental property investing a shot.

Flash forward a decade and two years later…It turned out that buying an apartment building in the heart of the gradually depopulated Englewood ghetto and filling it with section 8 voucher recipients was a guaranteed government-subsidized goldmine. Good ass passive income that diversified his diverse retirement funds.

Nate's $65,657 yearly pension, untapped 401k, $1300 monthly

social security check and rental property income afforded him the opportunity to take his quarterly trips to the Dominican Republic. There he'd sipped on margaritas and dined on young, chocolate prostitute pussy he'd often procure from Punta Cana's white sand beaches.

His penchant for foreign coochie explained his lack of addressing the growing issues plaguing the apartment building that housed roughly twenty-three tenants. Nate was very hands-off when it came to his property management, often times paying Glen, his functional crackhead ex-brother in law, to do spotty, erratic building maintenance. The decade of ownership devolved Nate into a prototypical Chicago slumlord.

This is the exact reason why on this beautiful and sunny Saturday morning, Ms. Fredquisha Pierce, a tenant who had been in the building now for some three years, was manifestly heated – and not by the sun, but by the sight of the roach family she just massacred with no remorse.

This was a problem from time to time she tried to get Mr. Garrison to fix. She'd contact him every so often through e-mail or phone call. Some days later, toothless crackhead Glen would arrive, chit chat, spray the house, lay out some traps and then take off, not to be seen or heard from for months.

Nonetheless, at the end of the day, the former Cabrini Green resident just grew immune to the infestation. Roaches were…just roaches. A minor nuisance really. Not a problem she felt compelled to bitch and complain to the City of Chicago's Housing Authority (CHA) in a letter or phone call. Crazy thing was, CHA had a dedicated hotline she could've easily dialed to address the pest issue.

Even crazier – Fredquisha was a section 8 voucher holder and these types of issues would get any landlord in trouble big mothafuckin' time. So much so Nate's despondent slumlord ass could end up getting banned from the Section 8 program and could face serious fines. And not just fines from the federal government, but even the State of Illinois and the City of Chicago.

However, the unemployed and welfare system abusing Fredquisha didn't want to rock the boat and snitch on Mr. Garrison. Why? She was constantly late paying her percentage of the rent that Section 8 didn't cover to Mr. Garrison. Nevertheless, unlike other landlords, he didn't give a fuck so long as he was getting that steady check from the 'gubment'.

Rather than clean up the crushed roach corpses slimed onto the bottom of the wall and baseboard, the uneasy and rushed single mother of three furiously made her way back into the kitchen in search of her half-smoked, peach-flavored Philly blunt. Fredquisha

picked the blunt up off of one of her dirty kitchen countertops and wedged it in between her crusty, plump purple lips. She whisked out a lighter from her left pocket and lit the blunt up. She took three long puffs. Exhaled. Waited a few moments to let the weed calm her jittery nerves. The THC high overtook her portly body. Fredquisha then opened the palm of her left hand and then hawked up the biggest ball of gooey, frothy spit into her palm. She put the lit end of the blunt out into the viscous pool of saliva and then stuffed it in her pocket for later. Nasty bitch.

Her breath a bit tart, Fredquisha now needed the refreshing taste of menthol in her mouth. Why she just didn't go brush her teeth instead? Well, she was gonna handle that later when she went to go take a shower.

The veteran roach assassin rummaged through a drawer near the same filthy, crowded countertop and pulled out her pack of already opened Newports.

"Fuck!" She forgot she was already on her last square. Then she quickly remembered she had a partly smoked cig resting in an ashtray with other butts, an almost overflowing mound of ash in the middle. The half-smoked square was cooling the fuck out like it was relaxing in a crowded Carnival cruise jacuzzi.

Fredquisha, slowly getting angry again, dashed into the semi-smoky living room and hastily located the ashtray sitting on top of a brown coffee table. Once Ms. Pierce spotted the cigarette she smoked last night, she leaned down, pulled it out of the crowded ashtray and then slapped it in between her cracking, dark violet lips. She lit it up with a blue BIC lighter in her hand. She took as many quick puffs as she could to finish the cigarette. Once the cig was no longer smokable, she put it out in the ashtray. She blew out a steady stream of smoke from her nostrils like a medieval dragon.

With a trail of lingering Newport smoke following her, Fredquisha marched through the dusty, smoky, and dimly lit hallway of her apartment. Her heavy feet thumped on the filthy beige carpet as another roach ran for its life, out of Fredquisha's sight. Lucky muhfucka. He better thank the roach Lord!

Disregarding the chit-chat and laughs she heard coming from her two sons' bedroom, Fredquisha stormed her way towards her youngest child's bedroom.

She pulled out her cell phone from her back pocket, glanced down in her hand and saw 9:43 AM splattered across the partly cracked iPhone screen. The phone's neon pink cover encrusted with sequins and glitter evidently didn't do shit to protect the screen from cracking some months ago. She had dropped it at a Hooter's out in suburban Lansing while she was on a date with some low key dope boy.

The agitated mother bit her lip. Fredquisha shook her head out of frustration of feeling like time wasn't on her side anymore. Grumbling, she slipped the phone back into her back pocket. Waves of infuriation once again swept over her. She was mad as fuck that she just wasted four minutes killing some roaches.

Without even bothering to knock, she barged right into her daughter's bedroom. Her daughter was sitting on the floor Indian style, using a couple of off-brand broke crayons to doodle in some cheap Dollar Store coloring book. The young girl quickly looked up at her obviously angered guardian. The young daughter knew her mother was livid as her body language projected, "lil girl, I'm finna whoop yo ass!" Fredquisha, with her eyes now widened in rage, gawked her young daughter straight into her unassuming, juvenile brown doe eyes.

"UMMM, MYYAH! WHAT THE FUCK IS YOU DOIN?!?"

The young girl, Myyah, was frozen and silent for a moment before she carefully answered, "Colorin'…'cuz I'm done cleanin'…"

Fredquisha looked around with her scrunched her yellow face up. Her vicious eyes widened with more irritation as she saw a pair of pink socks on the floor.

"YOU AIN'T DONE YET! YO ROOM STILL LOOK A MESS!" Fredquisha roared, and then continued to shout, "LISTEN! YOU BETTER HURRY UP AND CLEAN MY SHIT UP, LIL HOE. IN TWO SECONDS, I'M FINNA SMACK THA FUCK OUT CHO UGLY ASS!" Fredquisha then screamed out a list of things she thought Myyah still needed to tidy up before she was scheduled to go over her grandmother's house for the rest of the weekend.

"Ok," Myyah responded once Fredquisha gave her another four chores she needed to complete.

Fredquisha then growled at six-year-old Myyah, "DAMN! You know you just like yo stupid ass, hardheaded ass daddy! That's why he locked the fuck up now!" As the mother kept screaming threats of violence towards her now terrified daughter, Myyah jumped up from the floor and jumpstarted her "cleaning".

Poor Myyah, tremoring at the sound of her mother's hostile tone, nippily tried to do her best to finish tidying up her room – the smallest in the entire apartment. It was actually not a bedroom, rather a large utility closet that Fredquisha converted into a bedroom. Here was the kicker – Myyah's room was in actuality the cleanest in the entire 'three-bedroom' apartment. Aside from her mother, Myyah also lived with her two older half-brothers.

Fredquisha stood by Myyah's bedroom door, now holding her arms by her crusty, blackened elbows. She rapidly tapped her foot against the beige carpeted floor – obviously in much need of a vacuum. Hell,

truth be told, it needed to be professionally cleaned.

Regardless of the trillions of THC molecules running a marathon within Fredquisha's blood vessels, Fredquisha's anger was getting gradually explosive, especially with Myyah. Fredquisha had places to go, people to see, and ultimately some dicks to suck later tonight if her plans went smoothly.

Fredquisha, 34, once a vixen back in her day, was now a tired ass looking hoe who stood at about 5'5 and weighed a solid 213 pounds. She thought she was around 175, but she hadn't been to her general family physician, Dr. Patrice in while. Her doctor was down the block at the free Women's Health clinic. But Fredquisha only made a visit when she had a bad yeast infection, STI, or when she'd get a long-lasting, turbulent case of bacterial vaginosis.

Known once for her small waist, Fredquisha was now in possession of a plump, undefined midriff. Remnants of what was once a thick ass now resembled two steroid-injected brown potatoes lumped together. A set of double-d cup drooping titties hung from her chest. With no bra on, it was visible from the shirt covering her chest that she had both nipples pierced.

The biggest black satin bonnet cap crowned Fredquisha's head this morning, matching the slightly torn up black wife beater wrapped around her chest and torso. A big Celtic cross tattoo was etched into her unshaven right arm. A spread of angel wings was tatted across her upper chest. Some faded blue denim Bermuda shorts she bought some years ago from the Rainbow store not too far away tightly snugged her cellulite-ridden legs.

Under the sour-smelling bonnet were seven cornrows braided into the ratchet mother's skull. Yesterday Myyah's disability check (Fredquisha had the girl diagnosed with ADHD to get them social security-federal government coins) came in the mail, and rather use the funds towards good use like tutoring or afterschool care, a bitch was about to go get her hair, nails, and feet done.

Tonight was the night Fredquisha swore up and down she was gonna snag her a baller at DASH, some upscale black nightclub in the South Loop (South Downtown). Paulette, Fredquisha's hairdresser (really just her bestie who knew how to do hair), had this bomb ass ultra-long, middle part lacefront that she was gonna glue onto the bitch's head and have her ass looking like she was straight from Bangladesh or some shit.

With time slipping away and the feeling of anxiety giving her a slight migraine, Fredquisha temporarily turned her attention away from Myyah and then shot her head down into the room across the hall. "Ay, Quimani and Zy'meer! Ya'll need to hurry the fuck up and be ready in five minutes! Yo grandmama gon be here soon and so will

Myyah's! I got shit to do and you bad ass kids already fuckin' with my mothafuckin' weekend plans! HURRY THE FUCK UP NOW!"

"Ok, mama…" the two boys barked from the other side of their bedroom door.

Not saying a word, the slender brown-skinned daughter continued to scuttle her room, trying to figure out what else she could do to make the room look tidier. Still feeling her mother's vicious presence burning in the back of her head, Myyah quickly scanned the room with her innocent eyes looking to see if she did a good job. She felt she was done and did her best to follow her mother's irrational instructions.

Since her father, Austin, was locked up and serving a two-year sentence in Cook County Jail for a probation violation, Myyah lived in the oppressive terror of her mother. Myyah living with Fredquisha went completely against Austin's wishes. Before getting locked up, he tried hard to convince a judge to hand over custody of Myyah to his mother, Mrs. Watkins.

Austin thought Fredquisha was reckless, filthy, irresponsible and unfit to be a parent. Was he lying though? Hrrrm. Nevertheless – of course, this was HIS 'perception' and the courts have a different perception. So, unfortunately for Austin, his quest to get his mother awarded custody of Myyah fell on deaf ears.

Like most of these nonchalant, non-caring family courts that seem to always side with the mother (even without doing faithful due diligence), Judge Kathleen Steinberg, right before Austin was sentenced and locked up, threw the gauntlet at him. The Judge refused to hand over custody to Austin's mother. Her reasoning was that the courts couldn't trust the family of a man who was a reputed gang member and gun trafficker.

Also, there were no official reports of abuse filed with DCFS that made Fredquisha out to be an incapable parent. If anything, the judge ended up siding with the "struggling single mother". The judge didn't just stop there though. Not only did she deny Austin's motion to hand off full custody to his mother, but she also rescinded his shared custody agreement with Fredquisha and gave the abusive mother full custody, virtually eliminating his legal visitation rights. Courts wouldn't even consider court-supervised visitation. Making Austin out to be a ruthless criminal, the judge even considered a protective order against the father, and it was enforced until the day he went to jail and would remain in effect until he got out and went back to court for another hearing.

Truth be told, Austin, while he was sincere and had a good heart to do right by his daughter, fucked up and didn't do his research. See, that day in court Fredquisha was the one who ended up truly playing

her cards right. She had Jocelyn, her section 8 caseworker, vouch for her and her "motherly" qualities. She had 'good' references from the daycare she used to work at in Pullman.

Austin wanted the judge to consider possible testimony from Myyah herself, however, the judge refused. Said she couldn't truly honor testimony coming from five-and-half-year-old for two reasons: Myyah was diagnosed with ADHD, so Judge Steinberg said that any 'negative' testimony coming from a 'mentally challenged' child couldn't be trusted. And (2) Myyah, well, she was five-and-a-half at the time, and age plays a huge role in the credibility of testimony.

Absolutely devastating…But this wasn't a fringe case unfamiliar to a lot of men. This was an everyday occurrence in so many family courts in America.

Now, one would assume that a woman who wanted full custody of her child obviously had an unshakable and unbreakable bond with her growing daughter. But this simply and obviously wasn't the case at all between Fredquisha and Myyah. Fredquisha simply wanted to get her claws on the child for the sake of extracting government benefits and a yearly tax write off.

Nothing else.

Now, Fredquisha did do the bare minimum to provide for her daughter's basic necessities. However, she obviously showed more love and support towards her two oldest sons. Quimani, 12, and Zy'meer, 10, always had the freshest and latest shit. Jordans. PlayStations. Cell phones. You name it, those two young bad nigga boys had it.

Myyah on the other hand…Well, her mother would barely buy her anything. All her toys came from the Dollar Star. Bitch wouldn't even buy her own daughter toys at least from Wal-Mart or Five Below. While her boys stayed with the freshest linens copped from the malls out in the 'burbs or department stores on Michigan Avenue, Myyah had hand-me-downs, donated clothes or clothes bought from the Salvation Army…and that was if Fredquisha felt like spending some extra money on the girl.

So, where did all of this antipathy for her six-year-old daughter come from? Before getting locked up, Austin and Fredquisha were in an off-and-on, turbulent relationship. Although he truly had no long-term plans to wife her, he still paraded her around as his main. However, as their tumultuous relationship unraveled, Austin ended up leaving Fredquisha and this set off a cascade of events that ultimately led to there their being a deep and dangerous rift between Fredquisha and Austin.

Fredquisha, being a bitter and spiteful ratchet bitch, made no qualms either to take her disdain for Austin out on his progeny.

Twisted at it may seem, Myyah was Fredquisha's punching bag in every sense of the word while Austin was locked up. Frequent ass whoopings. Starvation. Grounding. Emotional Abuse. Verbal Abuse. You name it, Fredquisha specialized in it and made it known to Myyah every day she wasn't well liked.

It was sickening that a woman could birth such an innocent child into the world, and rather than take their frustration out on the father, she'd turn her frustration onto her very own innocent and precious daughter who simply just wanted to enjoy her semblance of a childhood. Tears…

"AHHH!" Myyah screamed as her eyes spotted the biggest brown roach crawling one of the walls in her bedroom. Myyah instantly dashed towards the corner and had an expression of trepidation buried into the small features of her brown face.

"WHAT YOU SCREAM FOR, HOE!?!?" Fredquisha rasped with a screwed-up face.

"It's a roach, mommy!"

As Fredquisha pulled the half-smoked blunt out of her pocket and lit it up in front of the child, she huffed, "Bitch – a roach?", rolling her eyes and shaking her head. But Fredquisha, hearing her daughter call her "mommy" suddenly got her very inflamed. "…AND WHAT I TOLD YOU ABOUT CALLING ME MOMMY?!? CALL ME FREDQUISHA! GOT IT?!?"

Myyah jumped again, "Yes, ma'am…"

The panicked girl froze for a moment, still looking at her mother with full fear. But not fear rooted in respect. Fear rooted in a pending ass beating. "There's a roach on the wall, Fredquisha…" Myyah slowly answered pointing at the roach, the sound of dread defining her response.

Fredquisha rolled her eyes again as she blew out a steady, heavy stream of smoke from her wide nostrils and huffed, "Ughh, really lil bitch? That's just a damn roach! Fuck you scared for, pussy hoe??! Go get yo shoe and go kill it. NOW!"

"But I'm scared, Fredqui—"

"DON'T MAKE ME ASK YOU AGAIN OR ELSE!" Fredquisha interrupted.

Instantly cutting off Myyah's plea, Fredquisha ambled deeper into the room and towered over her visibly shaken daughter. "Now I said go get cho shoe and go kill it NOW!"

Silent and quivering, a tear ran out of Myyah's right eye as she looked up at her so-called mother. "I'm scare—"

SLAP!

Without hesitation, Fredquisha's right hand went across Myyah's face. "I SAID KILL IT! IN FACT, GO KILL IT WIT CHO HAND! FUCK

THE SHOE!"

Not wanting to jumpstart a Saturday session of physical brutality, Myyah listened to her mother's stern instructions as she fought back tears. She carefully paced herself to the wall where the roach was located. In Chicago, roaches often looked like Rice Krispies with tiny legs. However, last year, after coming back from a quick getaway in Florida, Fredquisha somehow managed to bring some down south roach eggs in her luggage back with her.

When she and a few of her besties went down to Miami for spring break, they stayed at an AirBnB, and that was where Fredquisha believed the infestation started. She fucked up and left partly opened packages of Little Debbie Nutty bars in her suitcase and more than likely some 3-0-5 mama roaches smelled the sweet chocolate peanut butter crisp buffet from a mile away. At least that was the story Fredquisha told herself to justify where the big ass, non-local roaches originated. Who knows if that was the truth, but Fredquisha refused to do anything serious about the growing roach problem in her apartment other than call up Glen to spray.

Myyah, now only a foot away from the roach, climbed on her bed and cautiously moved her hand closer to the wall.

"Girl…If you don't kill that muhfuckin' roach, I'm finna kill yo muhfuckin' ass…" Fredquisha warned with widened, intimidating eyes. Myyah had listened too because she knew her "mother's" word was bond when it came to ass beatings.

The young, petrified girl raised her hand and hovered it about an inch away from the roach.

"Myyah! If you don't stop fuckin' around and kill that roach! Bitchhhh! I SWEAR! I'm gonna go across yo nappy head!"

Myyah's hand trembled. She couldn't do it. The roach was literally almost the size of her palm and had the thickest wings. Wings were so long and thick, that muhfuckin' roach was offering first class tickets to fly other critters to Dubai and shit. The roach's long antennas moved from side to side almost as if it could detect looming death…You better run Forrest, run Forrest, RUN!

Fredquisha once again quickly spat in her hand and put the blunt out. She looked around the room and saw a VIBE magazine on top of the girl's dresser. Myyah obviously didn't read VIBE. Fredquisha forgot and left it there one night when she cussed the girl out for not cleaning up the bathroom right. Fredquisha quickly rolled the magazine up into a makeshift pipe and lunged towards the girl. She then raised the VIBE magazine pipe in her hand and pulled it back in the air, ready to go across Myyah's skull. "KILL IT, GODDAMN IT!"

SMACK!

Myyah's hand crushed the bug in her hands; the roach's exterior

crunched in her small palm. Gut gooey white-yellowish roach gut slime splashed all over. Myyah would've vomited, but she had nothing in her stomach to throw up. No food was in the house other than an old loaf of bread, an expired package of off-brand Wal-Mart deli ham and some watery yellow mustard.

Fredquisha leaned in and grabbed Myyah off the bed, "Now go wipe yo goddamn hands! Get some paper towel and clean that mess up! I'm givin' yo ass a minute!" Fredquisha then swiped the magazine against the girl's back and bottom. "Wastin' my damn time!" Fredquisha continued to grumble as she made her way out of the bedroom.

Buzz. Buzz. Buzz.

Fredquisha's iPhone nestled in her back pocket vibrated. She threw the magazine back onto the dresser, picked the blunt up and put in her mouth and then whipped out her phone. She saw a text come in from 'Mama'.

"I'm downstairs" Fredquisha's mother, Evelyn, texted. The ratchet matriarch agreed to babysit her grandchildren this weekend. Mrs. Watkins, Austin's mother, was minutes away from picking up Myyah to babysit her as well but hadn't texted Fredquisha yet.

"QUIMANI AND ZY'MEER! HURRUP! YO GRANNY HERE! GET YO SHIT AND LEAVE!" Fredquisha barked in front of the boys' bedroom door.

Suddenly the door opened and the two boys, decked out in some fly gear from the Nike store, hugged their mother and then flashed down the hallway and out the front door. Fredquisha smiled, feeling overcome with joy as she watched her two boys exit the house. She wasn't just joyful she was going to have some time to herself. She felt a sense of rapture and pride that her boys were growing fast, becoming the young men she'd always envisioned. Real street niggas. Dope boys. Just like their fathers.

Myyah, after washing her hands, made her way back into her bedroom and began to clean up the roach murder scene on the wall with some water-drenched paper towel. Fredquisha's disposition quickly went back to insane as she looked her daughter up and down as if she was some unknown, wayward stranger.

"If you make any mention to yo grandma of what happened today, remember, you gon get it when you get home, you understand me, lil girl?"

"Yes ma'am," Myyah carefully replied as she wiped the wall.

"When you get done, bring yo muhfuckin' ass and your clothes' bag to the living room and sit there and wait for your grandmammy to come here. Do not mess with my television either. I'm finne go take a shit then shower. Do not come in my room for nothin'. Don't run your

tiny hands through my fridge either. Let yo granny feed yo ass. She should be here in fifteen more minutes. You understand me?"

"Yes, ma'am…" Myyah once again responded.

"Good…" Fredquisha spun on her flip-flops and strode her way towards her bedroom. The sound of her flops popping filled the hallway.

Chapter Two

After getting her weekend belongings together and following her mother's well-defined set of instructions, Myyah sat quiet and attentive in the living room, anxiously awaiting the arrival of her grandmother. Any other normal child would've been watching cartoons on a carefree Saturday morning, but Myyah was an exception. The girl wasn't even allowed to watch Saturday morning cartoons. Barely could watch TV throughout the week either.

Fredquisha thought the moment baby girl started watching the Disney channel she'd get hooked to wanting to go to Disney World. And the last thing Fredquisha had on her agenda was to take the daughter she truly didn't want to some amusement park all the way in Florida. Nonetheless, you already know she'd take her sons in a heartbeat. But shit, even then Fredquisha was too selfish to even go that far and take her sons out the state on a nice Disney vacation. She'd let their daddies do that. If a bitch was going out of town, it was for her own enjoyment.

With the TV off, all Myyah could hear was the scrambling of roaches fluttering their wings mixed in with the echoing of crackhead voices outside on the already busy street. Clucks looking for an early morning high.

Despite being birthed by an insane and abusive bitch, Myyah was such an adoring, beautiful young lady. She favored her father Austin, although she was a tad lighter due to her mother's yellow complexion. Despite having 3B hair grade, Myyah's hair was a complete, untangled mess this morning and was in bad need of a new hairdo.

No cooked breakfast was in the girl's stomach, and as time ticked away, her stomach growls increased in intensity.

Myyah could hear from a distance her mother was still in the shower. Under any other circumstances, she would've sat still and obeyed, but the growls rumbling in the acidic pits of her stomach were becoming painful. She couldn't go on any longer. If she was going to subdue her hunger pain, she only had some few minutes left to quickly make herself something to eat.

Baby girl slightly slid her body off the couch, but just as she inched

herself off of it, she somewhat slid herself back in place. She knew if her mother caught her combing through the fridge without her permission would lead to an automatic, immediate ass whooping.

She sat for a few more seconds, contemplating what she should do. With the stomach pains increasingly surpassing her threshold of tolerance, an emboldened Myyah, quiet as she could be, got up from the couch and sauntered into the kitchen.

Although she was too short to look into the sink, roaches raved and rioted amongst mountains of pans, plates, cereal bowls and utensils sedentary in the sink. Trillions of bacteria and viruses were living out their best days on them mold-covered dishes.

Fredquisha nor her two oldest sons hadn't done the kitchen in days, so the roaches were having a fest going after remnants of food rotting away in the sink. Thank the heavenly Lord baby girl didn't need to get anything out of the sink; otherwise, she probably would've come down with a horrible strep throat infection.

Myyah opened the refrigerator and looked around to see if she could possibly make herself a small ham and cheese sandwich. Her eyes latched onto the package of ham and then a loaf of bread sitting in the fridge.

KNOCK! KNOCK! KNOCK!

Myyah's slightly underweight body jumped at the sound of someone knocking at the front door. Not wanting to look like she was doing the opposite of what Fredquisha told her to do, Myyah suddenly slammed the fridge's door and then dashed back into the living room and sat on the couch, pretending as if she hadn't made a move.

The knocks on the door were more than likely coming from Myyah's grandmother, Mrs. Watkins.

"Damn, girl! Go get the door," Fredquisha growled as she made her way into the living room, frantically rubbing her head with a pink towel. A Newport cig drooped from her lips.

Fredquisha quickly slipped her black satin bonnet back on and took a puff from her cigarette. After taking a shower, Fredquisha opted this time to put on a maroon 2000 Pierce Family Reunion t-shirt. With a big oak tree spread across the faded t-shirt, the slogan, "A Family That Prays Together Stays Together", was written in cursive under it. Pretty ironic this ratchet bitch would be wearing such a shirt given that she didn't give two shits about trying to keep any semblance of "family".

Fredquisha was the type of hoe that didn't want a real lasting sense of peace with Austin nor his family. Yeah, granted, her and Austin weren't together anymore, but at least for the sake of Myyah's happiness and welfare one would think that Fredquisha would want to keep good relations with her child's father's family. Nope.

Myyah quickly got up from the dirty, stained brown cotton couch and opened the door. “Grandma!” Myyah exclaimed as she lunged at her 61-year-old grandmother and gave her the tightest embrace.

“Girl, I ain’t seen you in forever! Oh, how I missed you so much! You ready for this weekend! You know your daddy miss you so much and he can’t wait to see you!” Mrs. Watkins smiled and exclaimed as she held her grandbaby.

“I missed you too, granny!” shy Myyah shouted, somewhat fighting back tears. She was so glad to see her grandmother.

As Mrs. Watkins stepped closer into the house, she scanned the living room and quickly muzzled her face with her right hand. She looked back down at Myyah, trying to playfully ignore the wretchedness of the living room. If she thought that the living room’s space was bad, she needed to see the rest of the mothafuckin’ apartment. The house horribly reeked. The smell tearing apart her nostrils was almost inexpressible. An aromatic mélange of fishy pussy, cheap alcohol, cigarettes, roach spray, fried chicken, piss, booty cheese, must, hair grease, old hair weave, unwashed clothes, rotting food and pickle juice overwhelmed Mrs. Watkins’ nasal cavity. It was the fragrance of abject squalor and ratchetry. The irony though was that Mrs. Watkins could tell Fredquisha attempted to mask the conglomerate of disgusting smells with some cheap Dollar Store ‘Zesty Mountain Spring’ air freshener.

As Mrs. Watkins’ continued to look around and absorb the nastiness of the apartment, her eyes even burned a bit. Her skin even itched a tingled. Maybe her reaction was a bit psychosomatic, but any decent person stepping into the apartment probably would’ve had the same reaction.

The last time Mrs. Watkins saw her granddaughter was about a good seven months ago. Although Fredquisha had full custody over Myyah, occasionally she would allow Mrs. Watkins to talk to Myyah over the phone or let her stay with her over a weekend. Of course, this was only done when it was of utmost convenience to Fredquisha.

Even with all of the bullshit and tension present between Austin and Fredquisha, Mrs. Watkins always tried her best to be cordial with the psycho mother for the sake of Myyah’s welfare. Although there had been times when the grandmother wanted to fuck Fredquisha up like she was some random, disrespectful street bitch who tried to snatch her purse (when in truth she was), Mrs. Watkins didn’t have it in her to stoop to guttersnipe-level. Doing so could’ve potentially ruined any chance her son had at regaining some visitation rights once he got out.

Mrs. Watkins always offered her assistance and monetary help to make sure Fredquisha was taking good care of her granddaughter.

Even despite living all the way out in Matteson, the far southeast suburbs of Chicago, Mrs. Watkins had no problem driving into the city to get her granddaughter for the weekends.

One would think that any opportunity Fredquisha had to get rid of the girl she would take it. Oh, and then add in some cash too?!? But nope – MooMoo didn't want to take the risk of having Myyah tell her grandmother something that might lead to some sort of child welfare investigation from the city or the State. Then, Fredquisha always wanted to feign she was on some Ms. Independent shit. But bitch – you dependent on the state?!? The fuck?!? ANYWAYS…

However, this weekend, after seven months of not seeing the girl, Fredquisha finally allowed Myyah to go stay with her grandmother for a few days. Although it did take a deep talk with Dr. Sterling for Fredquisha to do so, her permission came with a stern warning to her daughter. Throughout the week Fredquisha kept telling Myyah that if she fucked up and revealed any details about their living situation and how she was being treated, she'd whip her ass, maybe even kill her.

"Damn, child, yo mama ain't been feeding you or somethin'?" Mrs. Watkins jokingly remarked, but a degree of concern was laced in her voice as she gazed Myyah up and down. The grandmother noticed Myyah looked a bit underweight.

Myyah didn't respond. *"Don't be tellin' yo grandma shit, or I'll take you out this world."* That's all grandbaby could hear her mother say as she thought up of a possible response to her grandmother's question. Rather than say something, she just opted to continue to hold her granny tightly. Didn't want to let her go.

Fredquisha, standing some short feet away, formed a slight grimace on her face. She was ready to beat Myyah's little ass if she gave Mrs. Watkins any inclination that she wasn't feeding her. Hrrrm, yeah, she was feeding her alright. Vienna sausages. Canned beans. Off-brand cocoa puffs with milk beyond its expiration date, on the verge of curdling. Mind you, her sons were eating like young Saudi Arabian royalty – McDonald's, gyros, pizza puffs, chicken wings, ice cream, candy, Mexican food, etc. Even when this Fredquisha bitch got her stamps and treated her kids to pizza, Myyah was only allowed to have half of one slice and one buffalo drumette. No ranch sauce either. The rest of the greasy Friday pizza mini-buffet was devoured by her two chubby, spoiled sons.

Mrs. Watkins then looked up at Fredquisha with a flat, somewhat angered face as she ran her hands through Myyah's uncombed hair. She grumbled, "Hey, Fredquisha…You got her stuff ready?"

"Yeah, go get your bag, baby girl…" Fredquisha commanded Myyah. Crazy she would call her baby girl. It was obvious she was putting on a show for Mrs. Watkins. Under any other circumstance

Fredquisha would've been calling the girl an expletive like hoe or bitch, but now that her grandmother was here, she had to at least pretend to be endearing.

Myyah let go of Mrs. Watkins and then made her way back into the dusty living room, picked up a small black garbage bag near the coffee table and then strolled over back to her grandmother.

Mrs. Watkins saw the garbage bag in Myyah's hand, her face flying to a state of complete shock and confusion. "This is her clothes and what not? Are you kidding me? You ain't got this girl an overnight bag or a suitcase?"

Fredquisha rolled her eyes and exhaled. "Mrs. Watkins, I can't afford any of that right now! I'm on a strict income! Look, the garbage bag will be just fine. Besides, don't she got some clothes at your house and shit?" Fredquisha spat as she puffed on her Newport.

"Yeah, I do…But, seeing how she looks like she lost some weight, I don't know if she will fit any of them clothes…"

"Well, like I said, that's all I got, so I'm sure ya'll will figure it out…Anyways, I'll see ya'll tomorrow. I gotta get goin' 'cuz I got my hair appointment soon."

"You know, Fredquisha, if you need help or needed me to buy stuff, you could've always called me or said something…," Mrs. Watkins chirped as she held Myyah.

"Mrs. Watkins, please, I got it! I know what I'm doin'. I don't need you questioning my parenting skills or nothin' like that. Besides, if your hardheaded son wasn't in jail, maybe he could contribute…"

Mrs. Watkins' mouth dropped and shook her head. "Hey, don't bring my son up into this! I know he ain't perfect and made PLENTY of mistakes. He knows that too as he sits up in that jail. But you know damn well I'm here to give you help if you need it. You got my granddaughter out here lookin' all raggedy and shit," Mrs. Watkins spat as she looked around the filthy apartment.

Her disturbed pupils once again scanned the baseboards running along the apartment floors and noticed thick, gray crud layering them. A tell-tell sign they hadn't been cleaned in ages. Empty Domino's pizza boxes were scattered all over the living room floor. Empty bottles of vodka and Hennessy lined the adjacent kitchen countertop. Mrs. Watkins then looked up at the ceiling and saw a group of big, thuggish roaches running a train on some THOT roach in the corner. Her thick roach pussy juice splashed all over the place.

"…And look at this place! This place is absolutely filthy! Fredquisha, how in the hell are you raising three kids here? This makes no damn sense! You got these babies livin' with roaches!"

"Mrs. Watkins! Please, just leave! Please! You doin' the most right now!" Fredquisha barked, shaking her head, shooing Mrs. Watkins and

Myyah away. “You lucky I’m even lettin’ her ass go with you!”

Mrs. Watkins shook her head and huffed, not even bothering to patronize that last rude ass comment. “Come on, baby girl. Let’s go…”

Knowing Fredquisha was a manipulative scalawag, Mrs. Watkins grabbed her granddaughter by her hand and scurried them out the apartment and into the parking lot where her Nissan Murano sat idle. Jonah, Mrs. Watkins’ youngest son, and also Myyah’s uncle, sat in the front passenger seat waiting for the two ladies to arrive.

Mrs. Watkins approached the left passenger side of the truck. She was glad she contained her words moments ago since she knew if she gave any lip back to Fredquisha suddenly her ass would use that as ammunition to stop Myyah from spending the weekend with her. Mrs. Watkins opened the back passenger door, helped Myyah in and then threw her bag of clothes in the back.

“Hey, Uncle Jonah!” Myyah smiled as she reached in to give Uncle Jonah a hug.

Jonah scanned his niece up and down and too noticed Myyah’s bodily changes. “Myyah! Girl, you gettin’ so big but you lookin’ so skinny. Yo mama ain’t feeding you or something?”

Myyah didn’t say anything. She just shrugged her shoulders. *“Remember, lil bitch, I’ll fuck you up if you run yo mouf…”*

“I know right! I said the same damn thing back in that apartment,” Mrs. Watkins commented hearing Jonah’s observation about Myyah’s visible weight loss. “Anyways, we gonna go to Golden Corral on our way back home and get you some real food in your stomach! You hungry, baby girl?” Mrs. Watkins asked as she helped Myyah secure herself in the seat and then proceeded to help her fasten her seatbelt.

“Yes, ma’am!” Myyah innocently answered with a huge smile running across her face.

“Good then…We gotta get some good food in yo stomach before your dance tonight!” Ms. Watkins closed Myyah’s door and then opened her door, got in and fastened her seat belt. The family took off and made their way back to the suburbs.

This particular weekend there were two reasons why Fredquisha reluctantly agreed to let Myyah go over her grandmother’s house. One – Fredquisha just wanted to have this weekend to herself, kids free. Destined to meet someone new and get some rich trap boy dick, Fredquisha didn’t wanna have to deal with any distractions coming from her kids.

Secondly, this weekend, Chicago’s Cook County Jail was hosting a daddy-daughter dance for inmates. At the request of Dr. Tameika Sterling, Austin’s jail-based social worker, she wanted Myyah to attend the daddy-daughter dance.

The 5th Annual Daddy Daughter Dance was hosted in the first week

of June. The County Chief Sherriff started the widely successful program to help inmates keep their bonds strong with their children. The dance essentially served as inspiration and motivation for inmates to stay on good behavior, and ultimately get out of jail, get their lives right and never come back. It was the perfect way to reduce recidivism given that the program had been piloted in other cities and was shown to be a success.

Austin, initially pessimistic that Fredquisha would even agree and let Myyah attend this year, was super-elated when he found out through Dr. Sterling that Fredquisha granted Myyah permission to come. Myyah was excited too since she had not seen her father since he was locked up.

When it came to making weekend plans, Fredquisha usually had no issues sending her sons over to her mother's place. However, when it came to Myyah, she didn't want her around her own family and refused to let her mother spend time or money on the girl. If her mother was gonna spend money on her children, she wanted all dollars to go towards her sons, not Myyah. This bitch was so twisted. If and when Fredquisha got a sitter for the girl, usually it would've been one of her besties like Paulette or Shauntanae.

Now finally free from her children, Fredquisha was in full carnival mode. She slammed her apartment front door, locked it and made her way into her kitchen.

Rummaging through her virtually empty fridge, Fredquisha pulled out a brand new chilled bottle of Tito's vodka and some orange juice. But baby lemme tell you…Looking around even more, this kitchen was an absolute fucking disaster. Dishes had been in the sink for weeks. A couple of juvenile roaches danced around an adjacent countertop like they were at an 8th grade prom. The linoleum flooring was sticky from constant spills of grape drink, soda, and other sugary liquids. Over to the left at an adjacent countertop sat several opened containers of fried chicken bones covered in ketchup-stained wax paper. If one were to look closely, mice pebble shit was scattered all over the floors as well. Aside from the growing roach problem, mice were another growing issue. But Fredquisha was unbothered. Glen, the crackhead maintenance man, told her to get a cat to deal with the mouse problem. But Fredquisha hated animals despite living with an array of vermin.

Fredquisha closed the fridge and then walked into her living room. But damn, God knows what lay behind the stove and fridge. Fungus. Mold. More mice shit. A roach kingdom. A roach galaxy. Who knows?!?

Any respectable landlord wouldn't tolerate this absolute filth. But Mr. Garrison didn't want to piss off tenants and lose them. This part of

Englewood that Fredquisha lived in was perhaps one of the most dangerous sections in the entire city of Chicago, perhaps even Illinois. With shootings happening damn near every night, no one in their right mind dared to want to willingly live in the area. Nonetheless, Fredquisha didn't mind. She was born and raised in this neck of the woods and to her, the area was just the set. She reasoned no one would fuck with her since she knew all the guys in the area.

Fredquisha sat down on the couch, turned on her television and tuned into a rerun of Judge Mathis. She cracked the bottle of vodka open and took a swig. Then she opened up the carton of orange juice and poured it into a mug she had sitting on her coffee table. God knows how long that mug had been sitting there, but Fredquisha used the mug usually for her homemade cocktails.

After she made herself a cocktail, she took slow slips. This bitch obviously lied about needing to get somewhere. Paulette's ass was gonna come over some hours later and glue that raggedy weave into her head in less than an hour. Fredquisha needed her kids out because she had her an 11 AM dick appointment coming up soon.

Buzz. Buzz. Buzz.

Fredquisha's phone vibrated. There the dick was. Ready to get jumped on.

She whipped her phone out her right pocket and saw a text message coming from Deontae, one of her "guys".

Deontae: WYOF (What you on fam?)

Fredquisha began typing back, "Shit, nothin'…Waiting for you. Where u at?"

Buzz.

Deontae: "About 20 min away. I got one of my guys wit me."

Fredquisha typed back: "Ok…So glad these kids is gone. I need some dick and more weed ASAP!"

Buzz.

Deontae: "I got you – OMW"

Fredquisha responded: "Who buddy?"

Buzz.

Deontae: "One of the guys from the block. He fammo. Good peoples. He ain't on bullshit…"

Fredquisha asked: "He down for whatever?"

Buzz.

Deontae: "Yeah"

Fredquisha agreed: "Ok. Hit my line when you get here."

Buzz.

Deontae: "Bet"

Chapter Three

"…We on the block damn near everyday
Posted with them 30's, fuck a .38
Your bitch all on me, all up in my face
I told that bitch: "Get back, I need some fuckin' space!"
You ain't with the shits, so stop the fuckin' flexin'
Fuck tryna wife a bitch, they out here stretchin'…"

Bass heavy lyrics to the deceased infamous Lil JoJo, a local Chicago drill rapper, thundered from the black 2005 Chevy Monte Carlo strolling up Halsted Avenue. Sunlight reflected off illegal tints plastering across all windows of the car. As bass thumped in the trunk, its vibrating, war-like sound mixed in with the car's V6 exhaust. The tints were the perfect way for Deontae to hide and immerse himself in the thick cloud of weed smoke filling his whip.

"So, where we goin' again?" Marvin, one of his guys', asked as they strolled up the street, headed to Fredquisha's apartment about five blocks north.

Deontae pulled the fat Blackwood blunt out of his mouth and passed it to fam. He blew out a dense plume of smoke from his nostrils, his eyes glued to the light traffic on the two-way street. "Man, I know this thick, yella bitch that stay up in Englewood that wanna let the team hit in exchange for some weed and pills…"

Cough! Cough! Some fire ass dro was playing the drums inside of Marvin's lungs. He covered his mouth and tried to contain his cough.

"Damn! she down to do two dinos in the AM?" Marvin asked as he finally got some oxygen in his lungs. "Shorty sound like a super-THOT!"

Deontae chuckled, "Hell yeah she is. I smashed plenty of times. I told her you was wit me." Marvin passed the blunt back to Deontae. He took a few tokes from the blunt and turned down the music slightly.

Deontae turned his face towards Marvin and asked, "So, you down, nigga?"

“Hell mothafuckin’ yeah you know I’m down, my nigga. Shit, some AM pussy? Shit better be schmackin’ like some muhfuckin’ Kellogg’s frosted flakes – GREEEEEAAAAT!”

Deontae busted out laughing. “My nigga you’s a goofball for real for real.” The weed-pull pusher paused for a moment. He rubbed his fresh, wavy fade and wiped his mouth. A tad on the chubby side, Deontae was light brown and was decked out in typical dope boy attire. Long white tee. True Religions. Red Jordans on his feet. No belt on of course, so the moment he got out the car his pants were going to be sagging. Marvin was wearing a similar outfit. His Jordans though were turquoise.

“Ok, well, just as a warnin’ tho, shorty’s crib might be a wreck. She kind of nasty with it, but that pussy fiyah though,” Deontae confessed.

Marvin let out a nervous chuckle. “Niggggaa, what!?! We finna fuck a bitch who got roaches and shit in her crib?”

“Yeah man, but, shit, I’m tellin’ you, that pussy is schmackin’ and the bitch will slurp on a dick and drink nut like it’s a muhfuckin’ vanilla bean Frappuccino from Starbucks…Venti size. That’s the tallest, my nigga!”

“Broooo, yooo, you nasty as fuck,” Marvin laughed, choking on the weed smoke. “I’mma have to do an assessment on this bih’s crib before I decide if I wanna fuck or not…” Marvin snickered again and shook his head. The slightly chubby tanned buddy wondered if his dude was playing games with him and just trying to deter him from getting some ass, but he was down for whatever. If the bitch was offering some ass, he was up for the task.

As the Monte Carlo made came up to the intersection of 63rd and Halsted, Deontae spotted shorty’s building, then parked on the empty side street. Deontae checked to see if any parking meters lined the street. Nope. Good ‘cuz he owed the city $300 in parking tickets and one more, a big ass yellow boot was going on one of the Monte Carlo’s tires. He chucked the engine off, took the keys out the ignition and stuffed them into his pocket.

“Aiight, so like I said don’t get freaked out and shit ‘cuz the hoe a lil filthy with it. But she gon suck them balls, might even lick yo ass!”

“Nahhhh, she can suck on them balls, but the ass is completely off limits…”

“We’ll see…”

Marvin produced a scowl on his face and hung his mouth open in disgust. “Nigga…You gay.”

Deontae smacked his teeth. “Fuck nigga, get out of my car so we can get this pussy and then bounce so we can get somethin’ to eat!” Deontae jokingly shoved Marvin.

Fredquisha’s weed man opened up his front console, looked down

and whipped out a bottle of some cheap, big ass green bottle of Curve cologne he copped from the Wal-Mart on 87th not too long ago. He doused himself in a million sprays and then handed it to Marvin who followed suit. The two young Gangster Disciples gang members hopped out the all-black Monte Carlo, wiped themselves free of blunt ash and made their way up to the front door of the apartment complex.

Deontae pulled out his phone and shot Fredquisha a text alerting her that they'd arrived and were downstairs at the front door. Less than thirty seconds later the front apartment door buzzed. "Wal-lah! Magic!" Deontae smiled. He checked his pockets one last time just to make sure he brought his stash of OG kush weed and XTC pills with him. Once he felt he had everything there, he pushed the front door open and led himself and Marvin through.

The duo made their way up to the second floor of the apartment building. They trekked down the cigarette-smelly hallway to Apartment 3B. Arrived.

Knock. Knock. Knock.

Fredquisha jumped at the sound of the three thuds pounding her door. She quickly pulled herself up from the couch, rushed through the cluttered living room and made her way to the front door of her apartment. She swung the door open, and there stood Deontae with a huge grin daubed across his face along with the more nonchalant, slightly nervous looking Marvin.

"Wassup, lil mama! Got you kids out for the muhfuckin' weekend and shit, I see!"

"Shit, you already know! Couldn't wait to get their asses out! They be so damn irra!" ('irra' was a Chicago's nigga way of saying irritating).

Deontae was a local, small time dope boy from Roseland neighborhood. Standing at around 5'11, Deontae although on the chubbier side, had this semi-linebacker build to him. Marvin was built similarly.

"Come on in…Place a bit messy, but fuck it, ya'll ain't gon be here that long anyways." Fredquisha led the two gentlemen in and then slammed and locked her door.

Marvin's eyes widened at the filth splattered across the entire apartment, and almost wanted to instantaneously throw up at the portfolio of disgusting smells punching him in his mouth, even his mouth. Ain't it funny how sometimes you can smell shit (no pun intended) through your mouth?

Silent, Marvin's eyes peered into the kitchen and saw the sink overflowing with dishes. "The fuckkk???" he thought to himself, completely blown the fuck away. He truly thought Deontae was

fucking with him about the condition of Fredquisha's apartment, but he obviously wasn't joking. This bitch needed Inyanla Van Zant to come and give her a reality check into the depth of her filth.

Marvin looked down and instantly snapped. "Ahhhhhh!"

Stomp! Stomp!

A roach ran across his shoe and he screamed, quickly trying to kill it.

Deontae looked at Marvin, slightly embarrassed. "Bro, chill the fuck out, it's just a fuckin' roach. You scared of roaches, pussy nigga?"

"Man, fuck you.

That roach was the size of a cat. Lil nigga tried to run up in my pants and shit!"

"Boy, bye!" Fredquisha lightly roared and rolled her eyes. "Where is you from anyways? Ain't you from the hood too?"

"Man, I'm from the South Side. 71st and Jeffrey. But…"

"But what? You ain't seen a roach before? Nigga, you a lie!"

"I mean, I seen a roach before. Just not a thousand," Marvin joked.

"ANYWAYS…" Fredquisha, slightly annoyed, rolled her eyes and huffed. But just that quickly, she changed her disposition, smiled and stuck her tongue out. "So, what ya'll on this weekend?" Fredquisha asked.

"Shiiit. Nothin'. Same shit, different day…." Deontae replied.

"I bet…"

"Anyways, ya'll want something to drink? I got some Vodka. I also got some Hennessy in the cabinet."

"Nah, I'm good," Marvin quickly replied.

Deontae smacked his teeth. "Lemme get some of that Henny…Go get the henny, nigga," Deontae instructed Marvin.

"I said I'm good bro…"

"I know you said you good, but I ain't. Go get it so I can roll up this loud, fuck nigga. Yo, Fredquisha, which cabinet it in?" Deontae, sensing Marvin's disgust with the condition of the apartment, was lowkey fucking with him. He wanted to throw his ass deeper into the filth by exposing him to the abomination that was lurking in the kitchen.

"In the right cabinet next to the sink…There's some cups there too," Fredquisha replied.

"Aiight, bro, stop playin' and go get it…" Deontae grinned, then grabbed Fredquisha by her upper arm and danced her into the living room, and then sat on the couch together. He whipped out his big ass Ziploc bag of weed, a pack of grape-flavored Dutches and his lighter.

Marvin cautiously strolled into the kitchen. "Man, this is some fuckity fuck shit, for real for real," he thought to himself as he entered the kitchen. Complete filthy madness smacked his dark brown pupils.

Roaches galore. Taking cautious, deliberate steps, he laser-focused his eyes into the cabinet that apparently contained the bottle of Hennessy.

Once Marvin arrived at the cabinet, tuning out the nastiness that defined the entire kitchen, he opened the cabinet. “Fuck!” he griped, quickly closing the cabinet. He saw four roaches chillaxing near a glass. He closed his eyes, took a deep breath and then slowly opened the cabinet again. Trying to ignore the roaches, he quickly pulled the bottle down and then made dashed back into the living room.

Although Marvin would give Fredquisha 4.3 on a scale of one through ten, her ass truthfully deserved a -17.8 for living in this nasty, fucked up apartment. Hopefully this Fredquisha bitch would get high sooner rather than later so he can fuck and then bounce.

Marvin entered the living room and then sat on an adjacent love seat as Fredquisha and Deontae looked enthralled with one another. “You rolled up yet?” Marvin asked.

“Yeah, fuck nigga. Just waitin’ for yo scared ass…”

“Mann, just light that shit up bro,” Marvin responded. Slight frown scrunched his face as he scratched his arms. Psychosomatic.

Chapter Four

Deontae picked the freshly rolled blunt resting on the coffee table up and handed it to Fredquisha. “You wanna do the honors?” Deontae asked Fredquisha if she wanted to light up the blunt and be the first to take some hits.

“Sure,” she smiled and grabbed the blunt out of Deontae’s hand.

Fredquisha wedged the blunt in between her tight, dark and dry violet lips. Despite taking a shower, she didn’t bother to brush her teeth yet. Let alone put on some balm to heal the desiccation and cracking present on her long, plump lips. Only God knows what this bitch’s breath smelled like…then again, Deontae, maybe even Marvin was about to find out in a few minutes. Eww.

Deontae handed her his black BIC lighter and then she proceeded to light up the blunt. Three hard pulls she took then blew two streams of dank smoke from her nostrils. The filthy living room began to reek of marijuana, however, the THC fragrance didn’t have the muscle and potency to overpower the vile stench present throughout the apartment.

MooMoo handed the blunt to Deontae. He followed suit, taking three long, hard tokes from the blunt.

Cough. Cough.

He pounded his chest; a scrunched scowl came across his face. He leaned over to Marvin and passed him the blunt.

Marvin leaned in a bit and took the blunt of Deontae’s hand and proceeded to take his pulls. Once he blew smoke from his mouth, he passed the blunt back to Deontae who then passed the blunt to Fredquisha. This was ritual for habitual weed smokers. Three tokes. *Pass*. Three Tokes. *Pass*. Three Tokes. *Pass*. The circle of blunt life.

As the fat Dutch blunt went around the room, Marvin began to relax a bit and get acclimated to the grime and pong emanating throughout Fredquisha’s apartment. Despite hearing the faint sounds of busy roaches scrambling throughout the apartment, Marvin just sat back and enjoyed the intense weed high taking over his body. “Fuck it,” he told himself. “I’m just here for the pussy anyways,” he thought. He leaned over to the coffee table where the bottle of Hennessy was

at. “You got any clean cups?” Marvin asked Fredquisha as he gripped the bottle and looked around the immediate area.

“Boy, just swig that shit…” Fredquisha responded.

“You sure?” Marvin politely asked.

“Nigggaaaa…” Deontae responded with a tilted head.

“Aiight, cool then…” Marvin nervously chuckled, opened up the bottle of Henny and then took a swig. “Ahhhh!” he groaned and slapped his chest. The biting, dark liquor swam down his esophagus and then down into the pits of his hungry, growling, empty stomach.

A nigga was fuckin’ hungry. Deontae and Marvin should’ve stopped at a Micky D’s and gotten some sausage biscuits along with some hash browns. Maybe even pancakes. But slidin’ in some pussy this morning was first on the agenda. The grub could wait. Especially now that McDonald’s was serving breakfast all day long. The one thing Marvin wanted to eat now was that nasty bitch’s coochie.

Marvin watched idly to see what the next move was gonna be. At any minute he expected Deontae to commence the sucking and fucking. With the TV lowly blaring in the background playing a rerun of Paternity Court, Marvin observed Deontae coolly slide his hand down Fredquisha’s stomach and then into her shorts.

Fredquisha felt Deontae make his move. He slowly slipped his hand down into her shorts and then gently rubbed her increasingly wet, moist pussy lips. Then he twiddled her fat, pulsating clit. Despite the orgy of nasty smells circulating throughout the apartment, Fredquisha’s pussy must was hot and rank enough to perforate up to Deontae’s nostrils. It wasn’t so much a bad smell though. Just heavy – a sign to Deontae that Fredquisha’s coochie was hot and ready for some dicks to slide in and tear them pink walls down.

Fredquisha lightly moaned with her eyes closed. She then opened them and gawked at Marvin who looked ready to get his meat slurped on. “What you waitin’ on? Let me suck that dick…” Fredquisha commanded.

Marvin got up from his seat and made his way over to the couch. He quickly pulled his shirt up and then unbuttoned his pants. He pulled down his pants and boxers in one swift motion, immediately exposing his hardened, seven-and-a-half-inch penis to both Fredquisha and Deontae.

Now, any person might think some potentially bisexual shit was about to go down, but this was a common ‘thing’ for a lot of homeboys to do. Find some hood rat THOT bitch who was willing to do multiple dinos all at one time. Dino was a Chicago nigga’s way of saying dick.

With his right hand still in Fredquisha’s hot pussy pocket, Deontae used his left to unbutton his pants and then slide down his boxers to

get his dick ready to be sucked or fucked on. He was debating if he was gonna let the hoe slurp on his nine-inch meat first before he dipped in the pussy or if he was gonna tag the pussy was some strokes and then let the abusive mama hoe slob on his shit. Either way, a nigga was gonna bust a fat ass nut this late morning and then slide back to his first baby mama's crib to get some pussy from her. Later that night he had a date scheduled with some strag he met at a Pep Boy's out in Dolton.

Without hesitation Marvin stuffed his dick into Fredquisha's mouth. As she tickled his balls and rubbed his taint with one hand, she stroked his meat with the other. "Hold up, let me take my pants off," Fredquisha said as she temporarily took the dick out of her mouth and then stood up from the couch to take her shorts off.

Taking her shorts and panties off in one swift motion, she then laid back down on the putrid, stained brown couch and spread her legs, revealing a semi-hairy cooch. Although somewhere down the line Fredquisha had some white in her blood, them pussy hairs was definitely 100 percent Kunta Kinte African. With the immediate area smelling like hot, musty puss, Deontae fathomed if her coiled, bushy pussy hair was responsible for the intense odor. It didn't matter though. Deontae loved the smell of pussy. So long as a bitch didn't smell like the kitchen of a Joe's Crab Shack, Deontae was good as fuck. He was gonna get his nut.

In fact, before Deontae was destined to stretch them pussy walls out, he had to get a taste of the cooch. He further spread her legs open and then pulled her into the middle of the couch as Marvin hovered over her, still getting his dick sucked. Although Deontae couldn't see it – his eyes were laser focused on the bushy pussy meat sopped with creamy juices –an audience of perverted roaches lurked from a distance, watching the threesome action go down.

Some of the roaches conversed among themselves, distracted from their mission to find food crumbs. Some had their eyes wide opened, delighted in the fuck fest about to go down. However, a few of them critters yawned. They had seen her get it in several times before. What was happening now was like a bad Ebony amateur vid on PornHub, so they took off in search of some fried chicken bones or some leftover, stale French fries rotting under the sofa.

Deontae leaned in and buried his chubby face into Fredquisha's pussy and began to ferociously eat the scalawag out. Disregarding the taco meat bush cutting up his upper lip, Deontae sucked on the woman's clit as he slid a finger in and out of her loose coochie. Easily locating her g-spot, he massaged the bumpy love spot until he could tell she was climaxing by the shivering of her jiggly, cellulite-covered thighs.

“Fuckkk, keep doin’ that shit, keep eatin’ that pussy,” Fredquisha moaned and mumbled as she delighted in Deontae’s tongue dipping in and out of her twat hole.

With Marvin’s dick still in her hands and mouth, Marvin was ready to get in on the pussy action. He took his dick out of Fredquisha’s mouth, slapped her on the cheek a couple of times to wipe some of the drool off his heavy rod. He bounced over to Deontae, looking to switch places. His turn…although he wasn’t gonna taste the bitch’s pussy right after his guy did so. That would’ve some ultra-gay shit to him.

Deontae stood up and then floated over to Fredquisha. He hovered over her as she grabbed his hard, salami roll-like veiny dick meat and instantly began to devour it in her mouth. She sucked on it as if she were a hungry redneck trucker smacking on some almost expired gas station beef jerky. “Yesss, fuck! Gobble that shit, you nasty bitch!” Deontae barked.

Marvin eyed the pussy with his glassy pupils, ready to use his dick as a weapon to inflict maximum damage on her wolf pussy. Pulling Fredquisha’s lumpy legs closer to himself, Marvin parted her pussy lips with his dick and entered into her gooey canal. Despite having some loose pussy, Fredquisha was able to snap and lock him in good. The tightening around his dick made Marvin up his stroke game.

Once terrified by the army of roaches surrounding him in the filthy apartment, the now roach-oblivious Marvin succumbed the bliss of Fredquisha’s pussy walls massaging his dickhead, taking him away from the ratchet wretchedness of the apartment. This disgusting fuck boy continued to slide in and out of her, pounding her as her stomach fat waggled like a pan of freshly made jello. Shit, even though Bill Cosby was a now convicted pussy fanatic predator, if his old, perverted ass saw this apartment, he wouldn’t dare try to drug this Fredquisha heaux to get some of that cooch no matter how juicy and or tight it was. Old fuck nigga would’ve had his ass at home trying to get it in with wifey.

Nevertheless, both these niggas fucking Fredquisha were foul as fuck for so many reasons. First, they were messing with a bitch who obviously had a serious problem with cleanliness. Who in their right mind would mess with a woman who, on top of having a clear roach problem, kept her house looking like a dumpster? Then, even worse, this bitch had the audacity to raise her kids among this dismal sordidness! But fuck all of that! Why weren’t these fools wearing protection? Did they just assume Fredquisha was on the pill? Had her tubes tied? Had her uterus scraped a million times from abortion after abortion, rendering her incapable from having future children?

Obviously, none of these issues mattered to both Marvin or

Deontae. Although Marvin was initially disgusted with Fredquisha's living conditions, at the end of the day, that still didn't demotivate and stop him from tagging some random THOT he didn't know. Pussy is pussy – regardless of its station in life. This was the way how so many Chicago hood niggas carried themselves – recklessly fucking these no good, disgusting nigga hoes, giving them the gas and ammunition they very much desired to keep their ratchetry alive and bourgeoning.

Chapter Five

Crispy gusts of Lake Michigan wind danced in delight amidst the blazing sunny backdrop as Saturday progressed into the mid-afternoon. With barely a cloud in sight, this was typical for the start of June in the Chi.

Cook County Jail was metropolitan Chicago's central jail complex located on 2700 California Avenue in the city's predominantly Mexican Southwest Side. Located on nearly 100 acres, in actuality it was the largest single jail site in the whole entire mothafuckin' US. It temporarily housed Chi-town's accused criminals as they awaited trial for various crimes. Gang members, dope dealers, domestic abusers, rapists, car jackers, drug traffickers and others called County their second home given the frequency of how often they came in and out of the place.

The jail, colloquially known as "County", was temporary shelter before inmates were tried in a court and shipped off to some state prison miles away from the city. Most inmates only spent a month or two here before they were sentenced and sent away. However, some were held here indefinitely, serving out long, prison-like sentences thanks to a complicated, jammed up court system filled with corruption, red tape and other administrative inefficiencies.

Nonetheless, despite the negativity that often characterized the jail, today about fifty inmates, all participants in the Daddy-Daughter Dance program, crowded their mostly young black and brown selves into the small auditorium located inside of one of the jail's low security centers.

One participant was Austin DeVaughn Watkins, Myyah's biological father. He, along with other inmates, were preparing for the dance later tonight by setting up round tables, chairs and other decorations inside the auditorium.

Decked out in an orange jail-issued uniform, Austin worked diligently side by side with another inmate, DeMario, arranging the round tables and foldable chairs around the makeshift dance floor. If one were to take a cursory glance around the auditorium, most of the inmates had hardened looks that matched their turbulent lives of

crime and violence. Some had faded tatts scribbled all over their faces. Some had flashy gold grills permanently engraved into their mouths. Others had dark circles burned around their eyes – the revealing sign of stress and turmoil they'd experienced living that murderous ChiRaq street life.

Austin, however, wasn't like the rest of the inmates. He was somewhat modelesque and to many looked like he definitely didn't belong inside the jail, but more on a NYC fashion runway. Standing at around six feet tall, he was in possession of smooth dark brown skin that paired well with his had suave brownish gray eyes. Well-kept twists ran down to the middle of his back. A lightly shaven facial beard adorned his chiseled face. Built like a running back for the Chicago Bears, had Austin not messed around in the streets as a teenager, he had a high chance of being on someone's football team, getting ready for the upcoming pre-season.

Austin spent most of his childhood and teenage years growing up in the heart of Chatham, a predominantly black middle-class neighborhood on Chicago's South Side. There he earned the nickname "MC" or "Morris", as everyone said he resembled Morris Chestnut.

Austin, recently turning 35, came from a decent, working-middle class family. His father, Gary Sr., who died some years ago from colon cancer, was a retired city streets and sanitation worker and his mother, Delores (most people always called her Mrs. Watkins), was a retired special education teacher. Despite growing up with church-going black parents who did their best at rearing their kids to be outstanding citizens, Austin was their only child out of four who somehow managed to get sucked into Chicago street life.

Austin was the second oldest in his family. His oldest sister, Kelly, was an executive director of an education nonprofit. His younger brother, Gary Jr., worked as an IT administrator for the City of Chicago. His other younger brother, Jonah, was currently finishing up his master's in creative writing from Columbia College.

Austin up until his junior year of high school always had his ambitions set on going to school to study architecture. However, when he turned sixteen, he got involved with a local gang and started committing petty crimes. Shoplifting, selling nickel bags of weed and coke was his start to his trouble. Eventually he became a jack boy. His specialty – robbing affluent white snobs on the city's North Side and Downtown.

As he got older and into his twenties, Austin ramped up his involvement in the streets and became the gun plug, selling all types of illegal handguns, semiautomatics and rifles to affiliated gang members across the metro. No bullshit, he did have a solid, good (yet turbulent at times) run…up until about six years ago. The ATF's local

office in Chicago set up a private task force to go after illegal gun trafficking in the city. One of Austin's "homeboys", Boonk, got snatched up by the Jakes. After rounds of torture, a confession (snitching) and a plea deal led the ATF straight to Austin. The jack boy-turned-gun trafficker got caught up in a major sting, and after being faced with multiple charges, Austin was looking at damn near life in federal prison. Even with this being his first major offense, that didn't matter to the federal prosecutors looking to squash Chicago's growing gang violence problem. To the white boys in suits, Austin hustled tools of death that were linked to Chi-town's growing murder rate.

For the average nigga who got caught up in the game, by this point, they would've accepted their fate and began to mentally adjust to life in prison. Gary, Sr. couldn't see one of his own go down like this and he became hell bent on trying to save his son and see him redeemed. Furthermore, he couldn't fathom seeing his son spend the rest of his life behind bars, especially since Austin had a daughter who he needed to rear. So, after much praying and deliberation, the Watkins patriarch dipped into his retirement savings and used damn near $100,000 to hire Attorney Alton Jones, one of the best criminal defense lawyers in the Midwest to save his son from them crackers. Guess you could say Alton Jones was Chicago's version of Johnny Cochran.

After lengthy back-and-forth talks with the federal prosecutors, Austin, on behalf of Mr. Jones', negotiated a plea deal. A deal that essentially allowed Austin to walk away with just six years of probation. There is a God, Gary, Sr., thought when his son got out of jail. Three months later though, Gary, Sr., passed away. Then, it wasn't even a full year later that Austin found himself back in legal trouble.

On a cold and rainy night, Austin got pulled over for a broken headlight. One thing led to another, the cops found a bag of weed and immediately took him to jail for violating his probation. Because Austin's crime was simply a petty drug possession misdemeanor, rather than ship him off to federal prison, the Feds decided to keep him detained in County for a minimum of two years. Although two years seemed like nothing considering just two years prior Austin was facing more than sixty behind bars, those two years still felt like a life spent in eternal hell.

Austin's scheduled release date was in a month – July 1st. With less than a month left before getting released, Austin was doing his best to ensure he'd never come back to jail ever again. Lesson fucking learned.

One of the first things Austin had plans on doing after getting out

of jail was going to college to get his bachelor's degree. Before his father died, Austin made a promise that he would clean himself up, get his act together and go back to school to get his bachelor's like the rest of his siblings did. It was the ultimate dream Gary Sr. wanted for all of his kids – to be college educated since he never had the opportunity to do so.

Wanting to fulfil that promise to his father, when Austin first got locked up he worked studiously hard to obtain his GED and also enrolled in a carpentry program. Inmates were encouraged to pick up a trade and Austin always loved doing craft projects as a teenager. It was something him and his father bonded over before he got sucked into them unforgiving ChiRaq streets.

The sound of clinks from metal chairs and foldable tables mixed in with the faint, peaceful conversations inmates were having with one another. "Man, I can't wait until I finally get out this muhfucka...," Austin moaned as he set up some brown metal seats around a round gray table. "Shit feels like an eternity…"

"Why you even in here in the first place?" the short, portly and older light-skinned DeMario asked, shaking his bald head.

"Man, probation violation. Jakes pulled me over for a broken headlight and found a bag of loud in my front console. Dumb shit – I know…" Austin shook his head as he continued placing chairs around tables other inmates were slowly setting up.

"Yeah, well, I been in here for damn near seven years…I know them two years felt like centuries…Can't wait until I leave this muhfucka too. Leave that street shit finally the fuck alone," DeMario uttered.

"What you in for?" Austin asked DeMario.

"Man, they got me on a possession with the intent to distribute. I'm a third time offender so they slapped me with a ten-year minimum…"

"Damn, they ain't send you down state…"

"Nah, prison overpopulated and because I'm a low-level, non-violent offender, County keepin' my ass…"

"Damn, well, at least you not all the way down in the boondocks… Probably easy for your peoples to see you and shit, ya feel me?"

"Yeah, true…especially my baby moms and my girl…Man, I miss them so much that's why I can't wait until tonight, so I can have some sense of what home feels like, you know?"

"Yeah, bro…I understand trust me. Well, maybe not the baby moms part. My BM be on straight bullshit," Austin groaned, shaking his head. His trivial scowl then immediately turned into a smile once he thought about Myyah. "But my baby girl, Myyah…I miss her ass every fuckin' day."

“Yeah, I know bruh, keep thinkin’ about her. It’ll make you wanna stay your ass out for real this time. I regret every single day of my life doing dumb shit.”

As the two men continued to talk and work at the same time, Dr. Sterling, the lead jail social worker, made her way into the auditorium with another corrections officer to her side. Dr. Sterling was medium height and build and had of locks with conch shells at the end of them. Decked out in full professional attire – a black suit, white blouse and some cheap pumps – if one had blurry vision, it would be easy to mistake Dr. Sterling for Lauryn Hill. The forty-something-year-old Dr. Sterling had her PhD in Clinical Psychology from the University of Chicago and had been working in prison mental health services for the last decade or so. “Hey, DeMario…I need to talk to you for a second,” Dr. Sterling yelled from the front entrance of the auditorium.

Her prominently audible and serious-sounding yell of DeMario’s name echoed throughout the auditorium, immediately catching everyone’s attention. All the inmates suddenly stopped what they were doing and turned their attention towards Dr. Sterling. “Damn, why she yellin’ my name like that for?” DeMario muttered as he put the seat in his hand down on the ground and slowly made his way towards the unassuming social worker.

Seconds later everyone returned back to what they were doing. Some inmates were lining the walls of the auditorium with high-end mauve and white linens, along with glittery ribbon decorations to make the entire place look regal and welcoming.

Dr. Sterling pulled DeMario off to the side as a corrections officer stood on guard.

“NOOO! NOOOOOOO! NOT MY BABY! NOOO! PLEASE NO!!!!” DeMario screamed. Austin, along with the rest of the inmates, suddenly threw their gaze at a screaming and emotionally disheveled DeMario. “Come on, brotha, it’s gonna be alright. I got you,” Officer Thompkins, the tall and built black corrections officer said, trying to keep DeMario from collapsing to the ground. “LORD! WHY! TAKE ME INSTEAD, GOD! PLEASE NOT MY BABY!”

Everyone completely paused what they were doing and gawked at DeMario’s emotional breakdown. Austin had no idea what was going on with DeMario but based on DeMario’s flustered behavior and erratic cries it was quite obvious something happened to his daughter.

A few other corrections officers, two tall white, young looking dudes, entered the auditorium and helped escort a semi-limp DeMario out of the auditorium. Dr. Sterling, still standing idle next to the entrance of the auditorium, pursed her lips and shook her head in disbelief as she held her arms by her elbows.

Curious as he was, Austin stopped what he was doing and slowly

trekked over to Dr. Sterling. “Hey, Dr. Sterling. I hate to be nosey, but what happened to my brother?”

Dr. Sterling exhaled… “Early this morning his fiancée and his daughter were unfortunately caught in crossfire of a shootout that happened on Lake Shore Drive.”

“Well, is she ok, is everything gonna be alright?” Austin asked, although his street intuition informed him based on DeMario’s breakdown she probably didn’t make it.

“Unfortunately…no. But his fiancée is in critical condition.”

Austin, a bit disturbed from hearing the news, covered his mouth with his right hand and shook his head in shock and disbelief. “Man, I’m so sorry to hear that. That’s some crazy ass shit to have happened today. She was supposed to be here, right?”

“Yes…That was his only daughter…”

“Fuckkkkk,” Austin continued shaking his head as he lowered it.

“Count your blessings, Austin…When your daughter gets here, you need to love on her as much you can because you never know what life will have in store for you.”

Austin couldn’t say anything in response. He just nodded in affirmation to her statement and walked away. It was completely fucked up for something like that to happen on what was supposed to be splendidly happy and beautiful early evening, Austin thought as he continued to assemble chairs around tables.

“Ay yo, what happened, bro?” Hector, another inmate asked. Hector was your typical Mexican clicked up gang member who was serving a four-year sentence for possession.

“Man, some niggas shot up DeMario’s fiancée and his daughter this morning on the e-way. Baby girl didn’t make it. His BM is fighting for her life…”

“Man, the game dun fuckin’ changed. Muhfuckas is straight murkin’ people on the highway now? Ain’t no more respect for the rules and regulations.” Hector, a bonafide Latin Disciples member, was referring to the norms and ways of old school gang affiliation.

“Shit, you ain’t lyin homie…” Austin responded.

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Later that afternoon after getting done setting up the auditorium, Austin made his way back to his cell to get ready for the evening. The dance was scheduled to start around 6:30 PM promptly. After taking a shower and shaving, he put on a suit that his mother bought for him on clearance from Macy’s in Downtown. Looking classy and dapper in a black Tom Ford suit, the time had arrived for Austin to make his way back to the auditorium.

One of the corrections officers who was assigned to be a supervisor of the inmates for the night went by and got Austin and other inmates out of their cells and escorted them down to the auditorium. Butterflies of anxiety flapped their wings inside of Austin's stomach as he anxiously awaited the arrival of Myyah. Not seeing or talking to her in years had really taken a serious emotional toll on him and he didn't know how he was going to respond to seeing her.

After getting down to the auditorium, there was still some time before the start of the entire dance. 5:58 tick tocked on Austin's watch as he helped Dr. Sterling set up a photo booth inside the auditorium. One of Dr. Sterling's best friends, Monique, was an event planner and a photographer who was going to take pictures of inmates and their family. She was also going to help people operate the photo booth. Dr. Sterling wanted to ensure inmates had colorful, graphic reminders of the event to keep them motivated and on task to stay committed to transforming their lives for the better. There's nothing more powerful than seeing a visual representation of your intimate bond with your own flesh and blood, and Dr. Sterling wanted to make sure inmates knew exactly what they were missing being locked up inside the heavily guarded jail.

"I think this is good to go now, Dr. Sterling," Austin said as he finished assembling the photo booth. "Damn, you did that pretty quickly. See, Austin, you are one talented brother. You got them good hands. You need to open up your own construction business or somethin' when you get out!" Dr. Sterling commented, amazed that Austin was able to put the photo booth together in no time. Monique would've did it but given that her assistant had to call out at the last minute, she was scrambling to set up lighting around another photo set in the auditorium.

"Is DeMario gonna be alright?" Austin probed, expressing concern his fellow inmate was going to mentally break. Austin knew he wouldn't be able to handle that type of devastating news himself. The last thing he could do was fathom his baby dying in such a horrid and unexpected manner.

"Well, it's too early to say. We got him in the psych ward now and sedated because he threatened to kill himself…" Dr. Sterling tightened her plump, red lips and put her hand on Austin's shoulder in a non-flirtatious manner (she was a lesbian), "That's why Austin I want you to really do your best not to get caught up anymore in that bullshit once you get out in the streets. A lot of people are rooting for you, including your daughter. I just know once she walks through those doors, she is going to bawl…And so are you."

Austin nervously chuckled since Dr. Sterling was right. "Thank you, Dr. Sterling. I'm gonna do my best when I get out," Austin

assured as he gazed around the auditorium and glanced all of his inmate brothers dressed up, looking like they were about to go eat at a five-star French restaurant in Downtown.

This entire day had been somewhat nerve-wrecking for Austin. He didn't know what flood of emotions were going to overwhelm him once his daughter walked through those auditorium double doors. From time to time when his mother would visit him she'd did her best to relay over how Myyah was doing. However, she couldn't report much since Fredquisha barely let her visit Myyah or stay with her, let alone talk to her over the phone.

"Well, it's about that time Austin…" Dr. Sterling noted as time got closer to 6:30.

"Yup…" Austin replied and turned his attention towards the front entrance of the auditorium. In about fifteen minutes or so, daughters of the inmates were going to be escorted into the auditorium with their guardians. Tonight, Mrs. Watkins was going to be there with Myyah.

Austin took a deep breath and strolled over to a table where a big fruit punch bowl sat out along with a platter of some mini-sandwiches, chips and other snacks. Austin picked up a red plastic cup and then scooped up some ice and some drink from bowl, needing to take a quick sip of something to drink before the start of the dance.

With the lighting in the auditorium retrofitted to resemble a prom, the entire auditorium glowed with soft pink lighting that matched the princess-like linens and faux diamond sparkling decorations that the inmates worked on all day.

As Austin kept taking small sips from the cup, he kept seeing flashes of Myyah enter his head. He didn't know exactly how she was going to look. In two years, going from four to six years old can make any child look visibly different. Just thinking of all the time he lost not seeing his baby was slowly pulling at his delicate heart strings and right then and there, as the DJ put on Luther Vandross' "Dance With My Father", Austin came to the full realization that he was totally failing as a father.

Chapter Six

After picking Myyah up from Fredquisha's old, grubby and crowded apartment, the Watkins clan hopped on the I-57 expressway and jetted back to the tranquil and spacious suburbs. Myyah was just so unbelievably relieved to be out of her mother's disgusting apartment and away from her unrelenting tyranny. As Mrs. Watkins zipped down the somewhat empty highway in her Murano, Myyah happily stared out of her tinted passenger window, taking in the vast and green suburban scenery. It was a far contrast from her everyday gritty and dangerous Englewood reality.

Aside from the trauma she experienced living with her trifling mother, Myyah's neighborhood was completely horrid. Englewood wasn't even one of the biggest neighborhoods in the city – it was a section only three square miles on Chicago's mid-South Side. Yet hyper-poverty, extreme gang violence, drugs, prostitution, murder, domestic abuse and other ills that typically plagued inner cities defined life for residents in the area.

Frequent streams of gunshots, sobbing mothers, crackhead fights and roaring bass heavy trap music was the soundtrack to life in Englewood. Irrespective of Chicago's brutal weather, armies of dope boys and gang members roamed the streets, aimlessly living life, setting themselves up to be future murder statistics. Nearly fifty percent of the residents in the area lived at or below the poverty rate. If one were to take a drive around the area, one would notice that virtually every other house was abandoned, marked with red X signs on their molded wooden doors. Tall, uncut shrubbery gated off many of these run-down houses and flats; dereliction their sole occupant. The Chicago Fire Department years ago started this program called the Chicago Red X Program that was designed to place red X placards on vacant houses and buildings, alerting first responders and firefighters that essentially these marked properties were beyond fucked up. Enter at your own risk. Shit, truth be told, the entire neighborhood needed a big red X on it. Dwell there at your own risk.

Sad as it may seem, just generations ago Englewood was once a bourgeoning black community filled with prosperous middle class

black families pursuing the American dream. Nonetheless, like so many other black communities across the United States, Englewood went through major decline in the 70s and 80s, and now the area was a living nightmare of urban desolation and decay.

Myyah always told herself she needed to do her best to make the best grades in school so she could become a doctor and live far away from the roach-infested ghetto her mother seemed so cool and content rearing her in. Myyah's imagined future of stability and prosperity kept her motivated despite being surrounded with so much negativity and destruction.

As the Watkins family got close to home, as promised, Mrs. Watkins stopped at a local Golden Corral to get Myyah something to eat for lunch. Although Dr. Sterling did inform Mrs. Watkins days earlier that some light refreshments were going to be served at the dance later tonight, Mrs. Watkins didn't want to risk having Myyah go into the dance hungry. Besides that, the noticeable weight loss on the girl had Mrs. Watkins maddened as it was more than evident Fredquisha wasn't providing adequate meals for the girl.

Honestly, what else would it be? Why would a growing girl her age be so small and not bigger? Although she had no verifiable proof, these were burning questions scorching Mrs. Watkins' conscience as she commanded her vehicle's steering wheel, her right foot heavy on the gas going ten miles above the posted 60 MPH speed limit. Not wanting to breakdown and go on a rampage about Myyah's possible malnourishment, Mrs. Watkins had to fight her inkling to pick up her cell phone, call Fredquisha and cuss her the fuck out. If she was fifteen years younger, Mrs. Watkins would've owned the passionate energy to beat the fuck out of the abusive bitch, but her fighting days were long over. And truth be told, the last thing she needed to do right now was get herself involved in some petty, back-and-forth argument with Fredquisha's neglectful ass. Besides, Mrs. Watkins was fully aware Fredquisha was the type of manipulative bitch who would then threaten to cut Austin and his family off from ever seeing Myyah again given the law was on her side with that ill-conceived custody order. All the grandmother could do was just try to calm herself and just focus on tonight. For right now, it was just important to get something heavy in calories into Myyah's small stomach.

Once the family got inside the restaurant and got assigned a table, the trio made their rounds around the buffet. "What would you like, Myyah? You can get anything you want!" Mrs. Watkins announced. With so much to choose from, Myyah didn't even know where to start.

"I can have anything, grandma?" Myyah politely asked.

"YES! Anything, baby doll!" Mrs. Watkins smiled.

“Can I have some fried chicken and green beans? Dem is my favorite. Fredquisha don’t let me have chicken when she gets it for my brothers. She says I can’t eat it ‘cuz I’m not old enough yet…”

“Really? Chicken? Girl, you can have all the chicken you want! What part you want? A breast? Thigh? Wing? I bet you love drumsticks!” Mrs. Watkins was a bit taken aback though hearing Myyah call her mother by her first name.

Myyah smiled, revealing a mouth containing some slightly rotting teeth. A few others were missing. Again, tell-tell signs Fredquisha wasn’t even keeping up with the girl’s dental health. “Yes I do, granny! Can I have three of them?!?”

“Yes! Come on. Let’s get you some mashed potatoes, macaroni and some corn bread too!”

After Mrs. Watkins went around the buffet and fixed Myyah’s plate along with hers, they made their way back to the table. Jonah was already sitting down waiting for the two women to arrive. He didn’t want to start eating without them given his mother always wanted to say grace before eating.

“Sorry about that, son,” Mrs. Watkins apologized as she pulled out a chair for Myyah and then pulled out hers. Myyah sat down and almost began to dig into her plate. “No, no, no, baby girl! We gotta say grace first!” Mrs. Watkins innocently chastised her grandbaby, but in an enlightening manner. “We gotta make sure we bless our food, so it can be healthy for our bodies!”

“Yes, ma’am!” Myyah had a grin on her face that projected slight embarrassment. Of course, back at home, blessing one’s meal wasn’t a requirement. Hell, Fredquisha hadn’t even bothered to teach the girl about God, religion, or even prayers. Basic bedtime ones at that.

“Jonah, go ahead and pray…And Myyah, say it along with us so you can learn how to pray and bless your food, ok?”

Myyah nodded her head, “Ok…”

Jonah and then Mrs. Watkins lowered their heads, clasped their praying hands together and closed their eyes. Myyah somewhat followed their cue and quickly mimicked what they did. Jonah then began to pray -- “Thank you heavenly father God for this food we are about to receive. And we pray that it will nutritious and healthy for our bodies. In Jesus’ name we pray…Amen!”

Although Myyah tried to closely follow along, she stumbled on some of her words. However, Mrs. Watkins nor Jonah judged her given it was an honest and fruitful attempt by the young girl. It was quite unfortunate she had a mother who didn’t teach her shit about how to pray, let alone teach her basic manners at the dining table.

“Ok…*NOW* we can eat… Dig in girl, I know you’re hungry! All skinny and what not! What does your mother feed you?” Mrs. Watkins

sarcastically questioned and snickered. She was trying to use innocent humor as a means of extracting info on what Fredquisha was feeding (or not feeding) her granddaughter.

"We eat a lot of hot dogs and beans. Fredquisha said we can't really afford a lot of food because we don't have that much money…," Myyah revealed.

Mrs. Watkins eyes turned to angered slits hearing Myyah call her mother by her first name again. Brief, awkward silence all of sudden became the fourth person at the table. Jonah nervously beamed at his mother. She then gawked back at him, giving him the same curious yet agitated look. Without saying anything, their frozen body language let each other know they were essentially thinking the same thing.

Myyah observed the slight pouts on her grandmother and uncle's face and quickly muzzled her mouth with her tiny, soft brown hands, "Oops, I should've never said anything. Fredquisha said I shouldn't be telling everyone our business…," Myyah apologized, desiring to somewhat downplay, even possibly retract the potentially embarrassing revelation.

"It's ok, sweetheart. Don't worry. I'm not gonna tell her anything, so don't you worry. Just go ahead and enjoy your lunch so we can head back and try on that special dress your dad and I bought for you tonight, ok?"

Myyah's slight concern dithered away as she produced a huge smile. "Yes, ma'am!"

As the awkward tense moment disappeared, the three returned to having light conversation while they diligently ate their food. Myyah was still hungry and wanted more chicken and some sides. Under any other circumstance Mrs. Watkins would've made commentary about the girl's gluttonous eating habits, but assuming her granddaughter was somewhat being starved and needed as much as she could eat, Mrs. Watkins didn't even mind if Myyah wanted a third or fourth plate. After round two, and everyone was visibly full, they left the restaurant and headed home.

About twenty minutes later, the family pulled into the vast driveway of the Watkins residence. Mrs. Watkins, along with Jonah, lived all the way out in far southeastern Matteson, a suburb about a good forty miles away from Downtown Chicago. Jonah, 25, decided to stay home rather than live in the city while he pursued his master's degree at a school in Downtown. Rather than drown himself in unnecessary student loan debt to rent some over-priced studio apartment near his college in South Loop, he opted to just stay home out in the suburbs with his mother and not have the worry of rent and utility bills boggling his mind. Besides, after he got done with school

he had plans on relocating to Los Angeles to pursue a career in screenwriting. He needed to save up as much money possible. While he wasn't at school, Jonah worked as a part-time bartender at a restaurant in neighboring Orland Park. From time to time he'd drive for Uber and Lyft.

After retiring, Gary Sr. and Delores sold their longtime Chatham residence and upgraded to a big, six-bedroom suburban McMansion in the heart of an upscale gated community. It had always been a lifelong desire of the Watkins to save up and buy a huge and gaudy palace-like house in the 'burbs, away from the hustle and bustle of the city. Although they originally had plans on relocating somewhere down south like Georgia or North Carolina, the couple opted to stay in Illinois to be close to their children and grandchildren.

Gary Sr. always envisioned having a home with a big backyard with enough space to host cookouts for his entire immediate and extended family during the summer. He coveted having enough space to set up a pool for his grandchildren, especially since three of his grandchildren had birthdays during June and July. Also, he wanted a big enough house to have large Christmas parties where he could show off the wet bar and entertainment lair he made out of the vast basement. Gary Sr. was truly a family man, and what he wanted more than anything was just to have a place big enough so that his four children and their families could come over and crash anytime they wanted. However, now that he was gone, and Austin was locked up in jail, Mrs. Watkins hoped one day, once Austin got his life together, he along with Myyah and his future wife and other children would join the rest of the family in celebrating birthdays, Memorial Day weekends, fourth of Julys, Labor days, Thanksgivings, and Christmases, etc. Mrs. Watkins knew her son wasn't a perfect individual and made his fair share of mistakes, but now that he was less than a month away from getting released, she wanted to work hard to ensure her husband's vision came to pass.

Once the family got out of the SUV and made their way into the house, Myyah stormed straight down the vast foyer and right to the luxurious living room. She jumped on the massive Italian black leather sectional couch and grabbed the remote control to the 80-inch flatscreen hi-def TV in the center of the room. It had been months since Myyah had the opportunity to watch television, especially the cartoons she liked. The last time Myyah had been over here, she was so enraptured with watching cartoons, she spent hours in front of the television as if she hadn't seen something so entertaining before in her life.

"Hey, baby girl, before you get sucked up in that tube, let's go try on this dress! I know you're gonna like it so much! It took us a long

time to find it!"

"What does it look like, granny?" Myyah asked as she flipped through channels, trying her best to quickly locate the Disney channel.

Mrs. Watkins smile, "It's a surprise! Come and let's go check it out!"

"Ok!" Myyah threw the long black remote back onto the couch and followed her grandmother upstairs to a guest room that contained mostly clothes and toys specifically for the girl. Since Mrs. Watkins barely saw this one grandchild of hers, she specifically designated a room to be Myyah's when she was allowed to come over.

Mrs. Watkins opened the bedroom door and allowed Myyah to walk in first. Within seconds the girl's big doe brown eyes widened once they attached to a Princess Tiana Dress inspired from Disney's "Princess and the Frog".

Myyah had a fanatical obsession of the movie and always envisioned herself being just like Princess Tiana. The last time Myyah came over to her grandmother's house, she watched the movie at least ten times. Her grandmother gave her a copy of the DVD so she could watch it at home, but once she got back to Fredquisha's house, "mommy dearest" took it away, and inevitably sold it at a local electronics store to get weed money.

The dress was absolutely splendid! Mrs. Watkins and Austin knew once Myyah saw the dress she would become exceedingly euphoric, and indeed she was. She began to bawl; heavy Amazon waterfall tears fell out of her adorable eyes and down her bony brown cheeks. The dress consisted of pale yellows and soft greens. Made out of light yellow organza with detailed light green organza overlay, the dress had a sparkly and bedazzling pewter colored flower with hanging green leaves running along the waist. The dress looked just like the one Princess Tiana wore in the animated movie. Mrs. Watkins searched for the dress for ages at the local malls until one day one of her church members, Sister Betsy, recommended she order the dress off Etsy. Her recommendation definitely worked out. Mrs. Watkins didn't hesitate dropping $400 for the dress along with getting a matching three hoop petticoat and shoes.

Myyah ran her hands across the dress just to confirm it was real. Once she gripped the fabric and rubbed it in between her finger tips, she let go, spun on her feet and then lunged at her grandmother and held her tightly. She buried her head into her granny's stomach and sobbed out of pure happiness.

"Ohh, why are you crying baby girl? Don't cry! You're gonna make me cry!" Mrs. Watkins exclaimed, tripping over her words as a million emotions flooded her body. Fighting to hold back her own flood of tears, Mrs. Watkins held onto Myyah and rubbed her back, consoling

her.

"Here, let's try it on and try to make some adjustments if we need to, ok?"

"Ok-k-k," Myyah stuttered, wiping her face and sniffling her nose. "Th-thhh-thank you so much, granny. This is the prettiest dress I've ever seen in my life!"

Mrs. Watkins was so damn conflicted. Seeing Myyah's reaction was priceless. It was an incredible bonding moment she was sharing with a granddaughter she barely got to see. But it was also bitter and painful evidence indicting Fredquisha of the crime of being a selfish, greedy and non-caring parent who obviously didn't bother to shower her only daughter with gifts. Granted, without a doubt Myyah was head over heels obsessed with Princess Tiana and that explained her reaction to seeing the beautiful dress. But what young girl honestly has that type of breakdown over clothing? Mrs. Watkins speculated. The only type of girl to do so is one who is neglected and in turn becomes overwhelmingly thankful for little things like getting new clothes. Something so many children her age took for granted. Now, truth be told, Mrs. Watkins didn't need to spend $400 on the dress. She could've easily bought one for $50, but given the special occasion tonight, Mrs. Watkins wanted to go all out for her grandbaby, and even more importantly, her father. Mrs. Watkins just knew once Austin saw Myyah in the dress it was going to be a transformative moment – a moment of spiritual motivation and self-realization. All the push Austin needed to get his shit together, so he can do right for his one and only daughter. But the other scorching conflict sizzling in Mrs. Watkins' mind was her absolute disdain of Fredquisha and how much she wanted to fuck that bitch up the next time she saw her. Mrs. Watkins had to play it cool though for Myyah's sake and for Austin's sanity.

As Myyah and Mrs. Watkins' emotions simmered, the grandmother helped the girl take her clothes off so she could try on the dress. When Mrs. Watkins first saw Myyah and the amount of weight she lost, at first, she was concerned the dress was no longer going to fit, but once Myyah tried the dress on, its fit turned out perfect.

"I have one last surprise!" Mrs. Watkins beamed.

"What's that, granny?" Myyah was staring at herself in the mirror, admiring the dress.

Mrs. Watkins walked over to a small closet in the room, opened it up and reached up to pull down a shoebox. She opened it up and pulled out something wrapped in pink and lavender tissue paper. She laid the gift down on the bed for Myyah to unwrap. "Here, come open this up," Mrs. Watkins said.

Myyah turned around and walked over to the bed. She slowly

unwrapped the gift and instantly her mouth dropped. It was a replica of Princess Tiana's crown. "OH MY GOD! GRANNY! YOU ARE THE BEST GRANDMA EVER!" Myyah shrieked and cried once again. "I get to wear a crown too!"

"Yes, my princess. You get to wear this crown. You're cute little angel self is going to look so gorgeous for your daddy tonight!"

Chapter Seven

"You got your seatbelt on, baby doll?" Mrs. Watkins asked as she chucked up the engine to her Murano.

"Yes, granny!" Myyah grinned and responded.

"Good! Always remember to put your seatbelt on when you get in a car. It's a lot of crazy drivers out here and you never know what can happen," Mrs. Watkins explained, looking back in the rear-view mirror as she adorned her granddaughter.

Grandma put the SUV into reverse, slowly backed out of her driveway and took off into the glowing orange and amethyst sunset that filled the skies.

Despite the daddy-daughter dance not being some luxury Gold Coast high-end gala or ball, Mrs. Watkins was dressed as if she was going to party with hifalutin white folk and other Windy City power brokers. Tonight, she decided to wear a black one shoulder jumpsuit that she recently bought from Macy's. The grandmother would've opted to wearing something more casual, but after the dance, Mrs. Watkins was actually going to head out later tonight and go stepping at the Dating Game, a small lounge located right off Stony Island Avenue on the South Side of the city. Jonah had agreed to babysit Myyah after he got off his shift. In fact, after the end of the dance, he was going to drive into the city and then pick up Myyah and take her back home.

Mrs. Watkins, despite being in her 60s, was in remarkable shape. They say black don't crack, and Mrs. Watkins was the living embodiment of that timeless adage. One could easily mistake her for being in her mid-40s. Guess you can thank her youthful appearance to yoga, Zumba and cycling classes four to five times a week at her local LA Fitness on top of her semi-vegetarian diet.

Standing at around 5'5 and weighing no more than 125 pounds, Mrs. Watkins eerily resembled a younger Lena Horne. She had short and wavy black hair with streaks of gray. Although she wasn't super-light skinned like the famed and legendary black actress, her hue was Creole red due in part to her Louisiana ancestry.

"Girl, you look so beautiful! We're gonna take so many pictures

tonight! Wow! Your father is going to be happy to see you. Are you happy to go see your daddy!"

"Yes! I miss him a lot!" Myyah exclaimed. She then asked, "Does he miss me a lot?"

"Of course! He talks about you all the time. He can't wait until he gets out so he can be with you every day!"

Myyah grinned as she dangled her small feet. "Granny – why is daddy in jail?"

Mrs. Watkins suddenly froze and didn't know exactly how to come up with the right answer. She had to seriously think of how to carefully word her response so that way she wouldn't put negative thoughts about her father into the girl's head. God knows Fredquisha was probably already using every opportunity she had to denigrate the man, so Mrs. Watkins wanted to make sure the answer she gave her grandbaby would be truthful yet respectful.

"Well, baby girl, he just made some bad choices. But he's not going to do them anymore because he cares about you so much and he wants to make sure he's there for you all the time."

"Was he a bad guy? Did he shoot a gun or something?"

"I wouldn't say he was a bad guy. He just hung around bad people and got influenced to sometimes do bad things. But listen, don't worry about that. Your daddy ain't gon' do bad stuff no more, ok?"

"Ok…" Myyah then turned her head and looked out her passenger window, once again admiring the backdrop of the suburban scenery as the sun glowed among the tangerine and lilac cloud streaks filling the skies.

Mrs. Watkins turned on her radio and tuned into a local jazz station. The soulful Al Jarreau sung his famous "We're In This Love Together" ballad. Hopping back onto the I-57 expressway, Mrs. Watkins put her foot on the gas in order to make it to the event on time. 5:15 PM tick tocked on the car clock, and it was going to take about a good 35 minutes to get to the jail if Mrs. Watkins went at least five above the posted speed limit.

Dr. Sterling told all guardians they needed to get to the jail by 6 PM if they wanted to attend the event, otherwise, they were going to be unfortunately turned away. Mrs. Watkins would've left her house earlier, however, she got caught up and lost track of time because she essentially had to give her granddaughter a complete makeover. Myyah's hair was a tangled mess, and Fredquisha didn't even do her part in agreeing to get the girl's hair done for tonight. Mrs. Watkins meant to ask Fredquisha earlier about why she didn't get Myyah's hair done, but after she confronted her about the condition of her apartment and got rushed out, the question slipped her mind.

About fifteen minutes passed. Mrs. Watkins was now getting on the

Dan Ryan expressway. Now in Chicago's city limits, she had to slow down her speed given there was much more traffic. Some more minutes passed and suddenly traffic came to a complete halt.

"Oh, hell…We got some traffic. Damn it!" Mrs. Watkins shook her head. "Oops, I'm sorry, baby doll. I didn't mean to curse. Don't say that word," the grandmother quickly apologized.

"It's ok…" Myyah replied. She then asked, "Are we going to be late?"

"No, we should be fine. I just think there is some construction going on…," Mrs. Watkins explained as she tried to peer out her windshield to see what was holding up traffic. It had to be construction because she saw some orange cones lining the sides of the expressway and from a distance saw flashing white construction lights emanating from distant MAC trucks.

Now in a complete jam, the Murano sat idle.

BOOM!

"AHHHHHHH!!" Myyah and Mrs. Watkins' screams filled the SUV. The Murano violently jolted forward after a black Honda Accord crashed into its bumper.

Mrs. Watkins for a moment closed her eyes and almost saw her life flash before her. "Oh MY GOD! This idiot just hit me!" Mrs. Watkins barked as Myyah's sudden cries filled the car. The girl had no idea what happened, and she too blanked out for a moment. Mrs. Watkins then looked in her rear-view mirror and saw the Accord literally hunching her vehicle's tail. She exhaled and then quickly turned in her seat and stared at Myyah to see if she was alright. "You ok, Myyah?!?"

Myyah couldn't produce words, just sustained, loud cries with her doe eyes now squinted in shock and fear.

"Shhh, shhh, it's ok, baby girl! This guy just hit us from the back," Mrs. Watkins tried to quickly console the girl, reaching back and rubbing her legs. "It's gonna be alright. See, this is why I told you we need to put our seatbelts on…" Pretty ironic she gave that life lesson just less than thirty minutes ago, and now here both women were caught up in an accident that could've been potentially worse had not any of them been wearing their seatbelts.

Myyah slowly quieted her cries. Mrs. Watkins then unfastened her own seatbelt and got out of the truck. She looked at the back of her truck and saw that it was completely smashed in. Had the Accord been going any faster, there was a real possibility Myyah would've definitely been hurt, if not outright killed!

Mrs. Watkins gasped and clutched her mouth in surprise. Was her Murano even drivable now? she wondered. She then turned her gaze over to the Accord and saw that its front was completely fucked up as

well. The grandmother peered into the windshield. It was completely whited out from the exploded airbag. Mrs. Watkins lunged over to the driver's side door and looked into the window. A young, dark-skinned girl, who looked no older than 25, was squeezed between her seat and the exploded driver's air bag.

"Oh shit! Can you not get out?" Mrs. Watkins nervously asked. She looked around to see if any other drivers may have stopped to help them.

"I think…I think I can!" the young woman responded.

A white pickup truck slowly strolled passed the accident and then stopped. A white man, who looked fortyish with a jet-black Elvis hairdo, hopped out of his truck and darted over to Mrs. Watkins.

"Is everything alright, ma'am?" the white man asked as he pulled out his cell phone. "Did you call 9-11 yet?"

"NO! OH MY GOD! I think she might be stuck in here! Can you call them?!?" Mrs. Watkins, flustered, opened the driver's side door, leaned in, and attempted her best to pull the semi-portly woman out. Once she got out, the young girl frantically looked around as she rubbed her neck. "Oh My God! I'm sooo sorry, miss! I had dropped my phone for a second, and before you know it, when I looked up I hit you!"

Mrs. Watkins deeply inhaled and then let a stressful breath out and grabbed her forehead.

"Why, God? Why?!? I was supposed to be taking my granddaughter to a daddy-daughter dance and now I think I'm gonna miss it!"

The young, chubby girl clutched her mouth with her hands and apologized, "I'm soooo sorry! I really am! I feel so bad now," she wept as a tear escaped her right eye.

Mrs. Watkins shook her head as she lowered it. "It's ok…At least we are alive…At least we are alive…"

The Caucasian good Samaritan got off the phone and walked over to the two women.

"The police are going to be here any moment now. Are you two women ok? Anyone in pain? Sometimes adrenaline can flood your body and make everything seem alright…"

"I'm fine…But I need to go check on my granddaughter and tell her what happened. She's still inside my car," Mrs. Watkins said.

"I think I'm fine, my neck just feels a bit tight," the younger woman responded as she massaged the right corner of her neck.

Mrs. Watkins walked over to the right back passenger side of the Murano, opened up the door and nervously grinned at Myyah. "You ok, baby doll?"

"Yes, granny. Am I still going to be able to the dance?"

Mrs. Watkins took a deep inhale again and then exhaled. She pursed her lips and hung her head to the side. Myyah looked at her grandmother, her silence gave her the answer she was looking for.

Chapter Eight

"You ready, bro?" Jaheyim, another black inmate standing next to Austin, asked as 6:29 tick tocked on Austin's watch. "Yeah, man, just a bit nervous. Ain't seen my baby girl in two years, broski!"

"Yeah, I feel you…Same predicament."

Beyonce's "Daddy" lowly blared from the fat black speakers set up in the auditorium. Officer Thompson, a fifteen-year veteran corrections officer inside the facility, had always volunteered for the annual dance, and tonight was no exception. Dr. Sterling knew he had a DJ business outside of working for the jail and asked him years ago if he would love to donate his services to the program. Without hesitation he agreed to do the event for free given he truly wanted to see the men inside the jail maintain strong relationships with their young children.

All of the inmate-fathers lined up in one single line as they faced the double door entrance of the auditorium. All the men, looking dapper, had huge smiles plastered across their faces. It didn't matter that all of them were locked up behind bars. Tonight, they were going to get a taste of freedom.

The doors opened, and suddenly a line of girls, all ranging in ages, colors and ethnic backgrounds, began to make their way inside the auditorium.

"Daddy!" That's all you heard come out of the jubilant mouths of the young girls once their eyes located their fathers. Austin stood idle, hoping at any moment he'd see Myyah. As more girls poured into the auditorium, Austin scanned the group wondering where Myyah was. Then mothers, grandmothers, aunts, even some uncles and grandfathers made their way inside. Austin still didn't see Myyah or his mother.

"Hrrrm," Austin mumbled to himself, growing increasingly concerned something may have happened to Myyah and his mother. Somewhat shivering in fear, he just remembered what happened earlier to DeMario and God forbid something similar happened to Mrs. Watkins and Myyah.

Moments later, Austin then observed Dr. Sterling make her way

back into the auditorium. She scanned the room and saw him as well, they both instantly locked their eyes onto one another. She beckoned him over near the corner, away from the group of girls and fathers, so they could have some privacy. Trillions of butterflies formed in the pits of Austin's stomach as he just knew something bad had to have happened. Fighting back tears, he nervously sauntered over to Dr. Sterling.

"Hey, Austin…I got some bad news," Dr. Sterling revealed.

"Please, don't tell me—"

Dr. Sterling interrupted him and said, "No, it's not anything serious like earlier. But unfortunately, I just got a call from your mother, Mrs. Watkins. They got into a car accident on the freeway and they won't be able to make it." She took a deep breath, exhaled then continued, "I'm sooo sorry, Austin. I know you were really looking forward to this."

Austin tremored at hearing the news. "Wait, was it a bad accident? Are they ok?"

"Yeah! They're fine! She said some young lady hit her as she was making her way north on the Dan Ryan. The young woman had to go to the hospital, but they had to get their car towed back to the suburbs, and you know according to detention center policies, we can't admit visitors in after a certain time for security reasons. I'm so sorry, Austin. I know this is devastating…"

Austin's eyes turned to weltering slits and his body grew tense. Silent, he didn't know what else to say. He was looking forward to this now for months and unexpectedly the opportunity to see his daughter was taken away. Not wanting to display full-on anger or agitation in front of everyone, Austin produced an uneasy smirk and muttered, "Well, at least they are alright. Besides, I'm getting out at the end of the month anyways, so I'll get to see her then."

"Yes…Of course! Don't let this deter you Austin." Dr. Sterling patted Austin on his back and then strolled off to go introduce herself to the girls and their parents.

Austin, now completely devastated, walked over to an empty round table and sat down. He watched the rest of the inmates reunite with their daughters and family members. Austin balled up his right fist and punched himself about four times in his thigh, fighting back tears of rage. He needed to leave. This wasn't what he planned for at all and he felt cheated.

He got up, and not wanting to make a scene, he excused himself to the bathroom in the auditorium. Once inside, he found the first stall, threw himself inside, sat on the toilet and began to uncontrollably bawl. Aside from his father's funeral, this was the second time in his life he cried and sobbed like a newborn. As salty tears escaped his

eyes, all he could visualize were imagined flashes of Myyah wearing that Princess Tiana dress and the crown he wanted to get his baby girl so badly.

Some moments passed and suddenly the door to the bathroom flung open. Officer Clayton, a supervising detention center guard, who volunteered to help with the event tonight, strolled inside to use the urinal. Austin, not wanting to be embarrassed by his crying, abruptly paused his emotional breakdown and wiped his face. He got up from the toilet seat, exited the stall and made his way to a sink.

Officer Clayton, himself a black man as well but in his 50s, looking like a zesty Judge Joe Brown, flushed the urinal and strolled over to the sink. “You alright, Watkins?”

“Yeah…Yeah, I’m good, sir. Just got some really bad allergies. You know how it gets during these Chi-town summers,” Austin lied. However, his limp and gray body language was telling a different, somber truth.

“Oh yeah, I got’em bad too…How’s your daughter? I know she’s having a blast out there.”

“Yeah…umm, she couldn’t make it.” Austin couldn’t even give the man eye contact as he said those words. “Dr. Sterling just told me they got into a lil accident on the e-way. But it’s all good though. I’m just glad they're ok and everyone else out there got a chance to see their peoples, you feel me?”

Officer Clayton went silent and scanned Austin up and down. He looked into his reddened, glassy eyes and said “Oh, man, I’m so sorry to hear that, Jenkins. You sure you alright, bruh?”

Austin tried to play it off by coolly nodding his head, “Yeah, yeah, I’m fine, sir. Just you know, like I said, these allergies are killing me. I think I should head back to my cell to get my medicine.”

“Alright, well, I can take you back if you like? I gotta head on outta here anyways.”

“Oh ok, I appreciate that then…”

The two men then exited the bathroom and slowly meandered their way through the crowd as inmates danced with their daughters to the melodies blaring from the speakers.

Austin, numb and confused, couldn’t even look at his other inmate-brothers enjoy their time with their daughters. Although he didn’t want to come off as envious and selfish, he felt like he rightfully deserved to have the same sense of happiness everyone else seemed to be relishing. But then he quickly reminded himself of what happened to DeMario earlier and how that could’ve easily been his situation. Putting himself in DeMario’s shoes, he erased his envy and hoped the inmates and their families would have a good ass time.

Back in his cell, Austin took off the suit jacket and neatly hung it

up. He didn't have the energy to take off the rest of his outfit. He just laid in his cell bed, stared up at the ceiling and kept thinking about his plans once he got out. He was going to fight hard, very hard, to be there in every second of Myyah's life until the day he died. And that bitch Fredquisha wasn't going to be able to stop him. He closed his eyes and drifted off to sleep.

Chapter Nine

"…Said little bitch, you can't fuck with me
If you wanted to
These expensive, these is red bottoms
These is bloody shoes
Hit the store, I can get 'em both
I don't wanna choose
And I'm quick, cut a nigga off
So don't get comfortable
Look, I don't dance now
I make money moves
Say I don't gotta dance
I make money moves
If I see you and I don't speak
That means I don't fuck with you
I'm a boss, you a worker bitch
I make bloody moves…"

Fredquisha, and two of her ride-or-die besties, Tykeisha and Antoinette, bobbed their weave-covered heads to the catchy Cardi B song, every ratchet bitch's come up anthem. MooMoo was did the fuck up tonight from head to toe. She was in full south side niggerette mode. Her lace front ran down her back, damn near touching her ass. She was rocking a gold, v-neck see through mini-dress that hugged every lump and bump in her thighs, ass and midsection. However tonight, to conceal her true bad bodied figure, Fredquisha had her corset tightly wrapped around her midsection to stop the combination of belly fat and stretch marked skin from being revealed to the world at large. With no bra on, it was somewhat possible with a naked eye to see her pierced nipples. Matching gold stiletto pumps were on her feet. Now, from a cursory glance, one would assume Fredquisha was a paid boss bitch who ran her own hair shop or nail salon. But Fredquisha's ass was unemployed and living off Illinois' tax payers.

Fredquisha knew Tykeisha and Antoinette from the neighborhood.

The trio went to the same middle and high school and had been besties since then.

Tykeisha was short, fat, and black, but didn't mind wearing loud, bold neon-colored lace fronts. With a huge gap in between her two front teeth, she almost looked comedic with this purple lace front bob she had on her head. Bitch looked like she was straight out of BeBe's Kids.

Antoinette on the other hand, was just a shade lighter than Tykeisha, but was much slimmer. Antoinette was a home health aide and was currently going back to school to get her RN license. Despite Fredquisha asserting herself as the de facto leader of the trio given years ago she truly was a standout sexy hoe, Antoinette now was the sexiest and resembled Tiarra, Scrapp DeLeon's baby mama, from Love & Hip Hop Atlanta.

As she sipped on her Mai Tai, Fredquisha scanned the dark and somewhat smoky nightclub. Tonight, B-Kilo, a local rapper from the West Side was performing, so you already know the club was filled with hood niggas from every section of the city. B-Kilo had two number one singles in the country and was on the verge of signing with Cash Money Records. So, while the crowd tonight was definitely on the hood side, without a doubt there were plenty of men in the room who had cash out the wazoo. This was the very motivation for why Fredquisha was trying to set her eyes on a baller she could possibly snatch up, bring back home and hopefully secure a future bag.

Earlier in the day, after getting some weed and some quick, bomb ass dick from Deontae and Marvin, Fredquisha wasted no time on preparing for this very hour. The outfit was bought last week with some child support she was getting from Quimani's father. Oh, and by the way, Quimani and Zy'meer had different fathers.

Quimani's father, Mark, better known in the streets as "Marco Polo" was the same age as Fredquisha and worked full-time at a payday loan company up on the North Side. However, the job was just a front – a way for him to get easy access to social security numbers and sell them on the dark web, the internet's "black market". Mark was an established credit card finesser and a lot of people came to him to get "working capital" to start up their own hustles. Mark was also linked to Chicago's local rap scene. So many local rap artists and producers in the Chi at one point in time came to Mark to "crack" cards so they can get come up on some quick loot and use the funds to invest in their music careers. In actuality, Fredquisha wondered if she was going to run into his ass tonight since he ran in the same circles as B-Kilo.

Zy'meer's father on the other hand was a well-known dope boy out

in the South Suburbs who pushed everything from heroin, coke, weed, xannies, ecstasy, lean, etc. Kevon, better known in the streets as "Gooch", was the definition of a mobile "street pharmacy". You name it, he had it. Although he wasn't on kingpin-level, he was close, but didn't want to let his operation get too big. So obviously due to Gooch's "occupation", Fredquisha didn't get him on child support because he still fucked around in the streets. She had arranged with him to not get him cast into the "CHSUP" system so long as he gave her a good "five hunned" a month in cash.

"Bitch, its so many fine ass niggas in here tonight!" Antoinette chirped as she sipped on chilled Hennessey and coke.

"Hell yeah, in fact I see this one sexy ass nigga I'm finna go talk to right now to see what the fuck he's on," Fredquisha said as she attached her manipulative pupils onto this tall, slender light skinned nigga with long dreads.

Fredquisha had an addiction to street niggas that somewhat resembled athletes. In fact, all of the men Fredquisha ever fucked with were dope boys who could pass for professional football or basketball players – hence the reason why she hooked up with Austin.

Buddy who she was gawking at had some skinny chocolate bitch all up on him, but Fredquisha, being the aggressive bully bitch she was, was going to dead that flirtatious shit. Pretty bold given that she didn't know who that bitch was. For all she knew, that could've been his main bitch, side bitch, or just simply someone who he was pursuing. But to Fredquisha, none of that mattered. Once she devoured eye candy with her devious stare, the nigga was all hers. She didn't believe in sharing.

"Antoinette, listen hoe, you need to go over there and 'accidentally' spill that motherfuckin' drink all over that silly ass hoe over there and then let me get my hands on that nigga..."

"Bitch, who you talkin' about? Antoinette asked as she looked around to see exactly who Fredquisha was referring to in the club.

"Look straight ahead and then turn slightly left. You see that tall, yellow nigga over there with the long dreads? Then see skinny, fake ass Azealia Banks lookin' ass bitch all over him.? That's the bitch I'm talking about." Fredquisha's eyes turned to evil slits, all types of ratchet machinations ran through her one-dimensional mind.

"Hahah, G, you're funny as hell, but I'm down to ride for my bestie," Antoinette smiled, shaking her head.

"Good…And Tykeisha, I need you to be look out and security in case a bitch might try to fight."

"Baby, you didn't even need to ask. You know I got you, boo!" Tykeisha stuck her pierced tongue out and proceeded to take a sip of her drink.

Fredquisha quickly ran her champagne-colored acrylic finger nails through her lace front. She then cracked her knuckles, neck and even popped her back in case she had to fight a bitch, maybe even a few bitches.

"Ya'll ready?"

"Yup!" Both besties replied together.

The ratchet bestie trio carefully strolled over to the light skinned dude and the skinny chocolate bitch. Fredquisha kind of went off to the side and hid behind some niggas just posted around, making fake light conversation. Tykeisha stood off next to MooMoo.

Antoinette, strategic as she could be, then lightly and obliviously walked passed the "couple". She pretended to have tripped over her heel and then thrusted the drink all over the brown girl, "OOOOPS! I'm so sorry! I'm so sorry, ma'am," she lied.

"Ughhhh! You bitch! You did that shit on purpose! Bitch, I already know how you ghetto hoes get down!" Fake ass Azealia Banks, although stunned, was pissed and ready to beat a bitch's ass for getting the drink spilled on her.

Sensing the potential threat facing Antoinette, both Fredquisha and Tykeisha stormed over to the chick and scanned the enraged woman up and down. "Bitch, who the fuck you callin 'ghetto hoes'?!?" Tykeisha barked, only inches away from the chick's face.

"BITCH! YOU AND YO UGLY ASS MAMMY!"

"I'll beat cho mothafuckin' skinny ass, you crack hoe lookin' ass tramp! You want these hands, hoe?!?" Fredquisha interjected and stood nose to nose with the enraged woman.

"Ay, ladies, come on now! Calm that shit down!"

"You know what, I'm not gonna stoop to these basic ass, trashy hoes' level. Bye, nigga. Have at it! This nasty, fat bitch look like she probably got roaches in her crib anyways…" The mad as fuck chick then walked off and sashayed her wet self to the nearest women's bathroom to clean herself up. But then suddenly she spun on her feet and dashed up to Fredquisha and her besties. Light skinned buddy with dreads tried to hold the girl back from putting her hands on Fredquisha, "Ay, shorty! Cut it out, bro! It ain't that serious"

"Nigga, get yo fuckin' hands off me! All I'm gonna say is bitch, don't let me catch you in the streets!"

Fredquisha scrunched her face up and rolled her eyes and neck, "Whatever, skinny bitch. You ain't with the shits like that!"

"We'll see bitch! Don't let me find out about yo punk ass, heaux!" The enraged, slender woman then walked off to the bathroom.

"Anyways…So, what's your name?" Fredquisha asked as she gently rubbed the dude's shoulder and smiled. Tykeisha and Antoinette, realizing the mission was accomplished, walked away to go find some

other sexy paid dicks in the club.

"Quantrell – but my niggas call me 'Trel'," he responded and smiled as he took a sip from his drink. Some brown liquor of course. Niggas loved that dark.

Chapter Ten

Absolute pitch darkness explained the late morning suburban starry skies. A tad cloudy. A gust or two ruffled wide oak trees lining the complex gated community the Watkins lived in now for some years. The full moon shown its glory, giving graceful light to the forest-like Matteson suburban enclave. Most gated communities in the far-east suburb virtually had no street lighting, so moonlight was the only source of evening luminosity.

12:45 AM flashed on the dashboard of Jonah's car as he navigated his way through the upscale neighborhood. Once the younger brother spotted his residence, he pulled into the dimly lit driveway of Mrs. Watkins house, his eyes now glued to Mrs. Watkins' damaged Murano. Jonah turned off the engine, opened his door and got out of his navy blue Mazda6. A recent purchase he made to drive for Lyft and Uber, and also have reliable transportation once he moved out to Los Angeles with this longtime girlfriend.

Jonah, standing at around 5'9, looked like a shorter, slender version of Austin. The only difference was a lightly shaven jet-black beard wrapped around his face and he had a fresh low wavy fade on top of his head. Jonah worked as a part-time bartender, and at times a server, at Natalya's Vineyard, a French restaurant and local winery in the neighboring Orland Park.

Austin shook and sank his head once he fully gawked and analyzed the entirety of the damage done to his mother's Murano. The crossover-SUV damn near looked totaled, but Mrs. Watkins wasn't going to know the full extent of the damage until Monday or Tuesday when a GEICO claims adjuster was scheduled to come out to do an assessment of the damage.

After the accident Mrs. Watkins and Myyah had to wait about a good hour before a tow truck came and got the family and took them back to the burbs. Obviously missing the dance, Myyah was completely devastated and spent the rest of the night crying, eventually sobbing herself to deep sleep.

After Jonah was scheduled to get off work, he was supposed to head into the city to go pick Myyah up from the dance and take her

back home in the 'burbs to babysit while his mother went out for the rest of the evening. But after the car accident his mother promptly called him and told him what happened. Little bro was a bit emotional about the entire ordeal given he truly wanted Myyah to go visit her father. Rather than come straight home, Jonah then opted to stay a few more hours at the restaurant to get some extra hours and tips.

Jonah made his way up to the front door of the brick McMansion and opened the door. He solemnly walked in through the foyer and quickly noticed his mother on the couch in the living room, still awake and watching a rerun of Family Matters.

"Hey, mama…"

"Hey…" Mrs. Watkins responded.

Jonah exhaled… "She still upset?" Jonah asked.

Earlier Mrs. Watkins had texted him and told him how Myyah was such an emotional wreck from not being able to go to the dance.

"Well, she's sleeping now," Mrs. Watkins exhaled. "I just put her to bed not too long ago."

Jonah made his way into the living room. He could tell from his mother's stiff and gray body language that she too had been crying. He peered into mama's eyes and noticed they were bit glassy, even slightly reddened. Jonah sat down next to her, lightly grabbed her and held her.

"It's ok, mama…Austin's gonna get out soon anyways, and hopefully he'll get to dance with her for the rest of her life…"

"I know, but still…We spent so much time and effort planning all of this. And all it took was for one accident. One silly ass girl on the expressway to mess it all up," Mrs. Watkins cried, wiping the tears that slowly ran down her cheeks.

Jonah didn't respond. He just nodded his head, continuing to console his mother.

The two sat in silence in the dark living room. The colorful light emanating from the TV illuminated the room. Some ten minutes later, Jonah closed his eyes. Mrs. Watkins followed suit.

About an hour passed.

Ding! Dong!

Jonah abruptly opened his eyes at the sound of the doorbell. Red and blue police lights flickering from outside seeped into the living room's windows, bouncing off the walls in the entire den and living room.

"Whoa, what's going on?" Jonah asked as he released his mother from his embrace. Mrs. Watkins slowly opened her eyes and saw the police lights dancing on the walls as well.

"Why are the police here?"

Jonah strolled over to the window, looked outside and saw a Cook

County Sheriff's car. His heart beats picked up in intensity as he then dashed to the front door and quickly unlocked it and swung it open. "Good evening, or morning…Is everything alright, sir?" Jonah asked the man who he assumed was a Sheriff.

"Is Mrs. Delores Watkins, mother of Austin Watkins, home, sir?"

"Yes…"

Jonah turned his attention towards his mother who was slowly walking his way to the front door. "Mama!"

"What's going on, officer?"

"Good evening, ma'am. I'm Officer Clayton. I'm a supervising detention center supervisor. It's about Austin…"

Chapter Eleven

Hours earlier back at Cook County Jail…

Officer Clayton sensed Austin wasn't being forthcoming when they were in the bathroom together. Allergies his ass. Knowing Austin's background, Officer Clayton walked out the bathroom torn and conflicted. On one hand, the detention center obviously had serious visitation enforcement policies. But on the other hand, he didn't want the inmate to become potentially suicidal over not seeing his daughter.

After he escorted Austin to his cell, he was supposed to have gone straight home. But his called his boss, Director Miller, the deputy director of corrections, and explained the situation that apparently happened to Mrs. Watkins and her granddaughter. Although the detention center has very strict policies, Director Miller tonight made an exception.

~

Clink. Clink. Clink.

Officer Clayton lightly tapped on Austin's cell door. He slowly opened his depressed brown eyes and wiped them, trying to adjust his vision to see who was trying to get his attention. He stood up and walked over to the door and peered out the tiny window and saw Officer Clayton's beady eyes and Joe Brown mustache.

The rattling of keys could be heard, and then the door to the cell opened up. "Hey Watkins, go put your suit back on, get that crust off your face and come with me…"

Austin scrunched his face up on confusion. "Why, what for?"

Officer Clayton leered. "Look, just do as I say, boy," Clayton commanded in a warm, brotherly tone.

Austin didn't know if he was dreaming or if he was fully awake, but without hesitation he quickly followed Officer Clayton's instructions. He lunged over to his sink, slapped chlorine-reeked cold water on his face and dried it off with a towel. Then he put the suit back on, jetted out the cell and then trailed the somewhat fatherly guard.

Austin looked down at his watch and saw it was almost ten minutes before 3 AM. Although he had a partial inkling as to what was going on, he didn't want to ask any more questions. He just followed the guard-supervisor to wherever he was taking him. A smile

from the east coast to the west stretched across Austin's dark chocolate chiseled face.

~

"Baby girl! Wake up! We gotta go!" Mrs. Watkins shook her granddaughter awake.

Myyah opened her still sob-filled glassy eyes and gazed at her grandmother. "What's happening, grandma?" Myyah asked, confused.

"We get to go see your daddy!" Mrs. Watkins' eyes widened with overwhelming happiness.

"For real?!? We can see him now?!?"

"YES!" Mrs. Watkins screeched. "Come on! Let's get this dress back on!"

Without even continuing to question her grandmother, Myyah got up from the bed and walked over to the closet. Her grandmother quickly helped her put the dress back on. Mrs. Watkins then quickly pulled Myyah into the bathroom, quickly washed the girls' face and then the both of them jetted downstairs. Jonah, wide awake and thrilled, followed the women. The family then hopped into Officer Clayton's Crown Vic and sped off into the city.

Nervous and excited, Myyah held her hands, eyes glued to the highway as Officer Clayton commanded the steering wheel. Jonah was in the front fiddling with one of his DSLR cameras. Mrs. Watkins had her arms wrapped around Myyah's shoulders.

"Am I dreaming, granny?!?" Myyah excitedly asked.

"No, baby girl! This isn't a dream at all! This is real!"

Chapter Twelve

"…Back when I was a child
Before life removed all the innocence
My father would lift me high
And dance with my mother and me
And then
Spin me around 'till I fell asleep
Then up the stairs he would carry me
And I knew for sure
I was loved
If I could get another chance
Another walk
Another dance with him
I'd play a song that would never ever end
How I'd love love
Love To dance with my father again…"

Austin and Officer Clayton trekked down the hallway of the bright detention center. Emotions began to overtake Austin. His heart beat raced like a champion horse at the Kentucky Derby. As the two men got close proximity to the auditorium, Austin was on the verge of collapsing and breaking down right then and there.

Officer Clayton had called up Dr. Sterling after the close of the event and informed her that he had permission from Director Miller to extend visitation hours, and that he wanted her to keep the dance floor open and all the decorations intact so that Austin could have a chance to dance with his daughter. Dr. Sterling, elated, agreed without a hesitation. So did the DJ.

As Austin and Officer Clayton approached the doors of the auditorium, the fatherly detention center supervisor paused and turned directly into Austin. The inmate was fighting his hardest to hold his salty tears back.

"Now, listen Watkins, I didn't have to do this, but I knew you were bullshitting me back in that bathroom. Man to man, I've been in your

shoes. I lost my daughter Christina two years ago to leukemia. I think about her every god damn day of my life. You have a chance bro to do right by that little girl in there. Go in there, love all over her, hold her, kiss her, tell her you love her a million times…And after you get out of here, I better not see or hear about your ass in here ever again. Got it?"

Austin, hearing Officer Clayton's words, tore him down. Officer Clayton now seemingly looked a tad frazzled and wracked with grief, but despite almost breaking down himself and crying over his deceased daughter, he wiped a few tears that trickled out of the corners of his eyes, leaned in and gave Austin a tight, brotherly hug. "You got this, young man. Do right by that girl. Be there in every moment of her life…You never know what tomorrow brings."

"Ok-k," Austin stuttered.

Officer Clayton released Austin. The detention center supervisor then turned his attention back to the double doors of the auditorium. Soft, flowery vibrations of Luther Vandross' "Dance With My Father" poured through the door. Clayton opened the doors, and instantaneously Austin's passion-filled eyes enclosed onto his family, most importantly, his daughter he hadn't seen in two long, hard years.

Myyah's eyes zoomed right into solemn Austin. "DADDDYYYY!" she wailed as she took off running towards her father. Austin, doing the same, met his daughter halfway into the dance floor.

Austin quickly collapsed to his knees with his arms wide open. Myyah flew into his embrace and Austin held her tightly as their sobs filled the surrounding area.

"Oh my God! My baby girl! You gon' always be my baby!" Austin cried as he looked Myyah into her face and gave her kisses all up and down her cheeks and skinny neck. "Look at you, you've gotten so big!"

Myyah couldn't respond. She was so overawed with jubilation at the sight of her father, that words wouldn't even make sense at this point. Despite being six, there was nothing like the growing bond a daughter had with her a father, especially in this instance. The love a girl has for her grandmother, uncles, aunts and others is one thing. But the love a daughter has for father – indescribable and unfathomable.

When a man lives up to the expectation of fatherhood, protecting and guiding his kith and kin, daughters stand in admiration of their kingly qualities. And given that Myyah was living in such tumultuous conditions with a woman who didn't even deserve the title "mother", Austin at this point was Myyah's only true source of parental love and protection. Unfortunately given Austin made bad choices in life that resulted in him losing split custody and going to jail, Austin couldn't

be there to protect his only daughter.

Dr. Sterling, smiling, used a paper towel she had her pocket to wipe tears from her face. She clasped her hands together and mumbled, “This is healing. This is God…”

Mrs. Watkins and Jonah, both overwhelmed, trembling with elation, soaked in oceanic tears, strolled over to Austin and Myyah. “I’m so sorry about earlier, son!” Mrs. Watkins muttered and smiled.

Austin picked a still crying Myyah up and then went in to hug his mother, “Thank you, mama! Thank you so much! You just don’t even understand.”

“I know! Don’t even say much! Enjoy this time with Myyah!”

Austin then turned his attention towards Jonah, “Waddup, lil bro!”

“Ahah, nothin, just got some bad allergies, that’s all!” Jonah laughed as he wiped tears from his face and went in to give his big brother a huge hug.

“Yeah, I know. All that pollen and dust in the air got me out here lookin’ crazy as hell!” Austin responded, chuckling.

As the Luther Vandross’ song continued to play, Austin took Myyah off his shoulders and stood her up. “You ready to dance, princess? You look so beautiful in that dress!”

“Yessss, daddy! I wanna dance all day, all night, forever, with you! I never wanna leave!”

“Me either, princess, me either!”

Mrs. Watkins and Jonah strolled off to let Austin and Myyah dance together to the tune.

Dr. Sterling and Officer Clayton stood off to the side and observed the beautiful reunion between father and daughter.

Officer Clayton pulled out his phone and stared at a background picture of his deceased daughter, Moriah, who died from leukemia at the age of 28. He couldn’t hold it in anymore. His manly, weeping cries quickly caught Dr. Sterling’s attention.

“Awww, Officer Clayton, it’s gonna be alright. Shhh, shh, don’t cry,” she consoled.

“If…If I could just have one more dance with my daughter. I’d do anything, anything in the world to get it,” he muttered and wiped his face of tears. He quickly gathered himself, wiped his face and muted his sniffling. “Sorry about that, Doc. Been two long years.”

“Time heals everything,” Dr. Sterling responded.

“Well, if it does then my heart has years more to recover.”

Chapter Thirteen

"…Smokin on
Hay in the middle of the barn
Smokin on
Hay in the middle of the barn…"

H*ours earlier…*"OOOH SHIT, BITCH! THAT'S MY SHIT! CRUCIAL CONFLICT!" Antoinette screamed as the throwback 90s west side Chi-town classic "Hay" rumbled from the speakers inside the still crowed hip hop club.

Suddenly a flood of Ratchettas started throwing their hands up the air, swaying side to side, twerking as the Crucial Conflict Mary Jane melody vibrated the walls of the club.

"She crazy as hell," Fredquisha remarked in response to Antoinette's shout. Still posted up next to Trel, the two were still chopping it up, long after the confrontation with brown skinned bitch earlier.

Most clubs in Chicago closed at 3 AM. "What time is it anyways? I'm finna bounce pretty soon," Trel said as he whipped out his phone from his pocket and glanced down at the time on his iPhone 8. "Shit, damn, it's almost 1."

"Damn, you just gon' up and leave a bitch like that?" Fredquisha sassed and smiled. She trying to give his ass a hint.

"I mean, you wanna bounce with me too?" Trel smilingly asked, licking his lips, scanning the woman up and down.

"Well, lemme go check in with my girls! I gotta go pee too. Drinkin' all damn night got my bladder 'bout to explode," Fredquisha quipped and as she twiddled with the end of her cheap lace front, looking all fake bashful and shit.

"Ok. Just meet me outside. I'm gonna get us an Uber. So, we gon head back to your place then?" Trel probed.

"My place? Why not your place?" Fredquisha lightly spat back, a tad confused. She didn't feel comfortable bringing Trel over given the nastiness of her apartment. First impression is the best impression, and

the last thing she needed was to have Trel come over and end up getting turned off by the horrid messiness and squalor of her apartment.

"Well, we can't crash at my crib 'cuz my baby mama and my kids over there…"

"Baby mama?!?! NIGGA! You ain't tell me you had a baby mama?!? The fuck?!?!" Fredquisha suddenly got fucking pissed and rolled her eyes, huffing. This nigga had her all the way fucked up. She'd be damned if she shared a nigga with another bitch, especially a bitch who was already classified as the main.

Trel smacked his teeth responded with, "Man, it ain't even like that. She just stayin' there until she get her own place. We ain't even fuckin' like that."

Fredquisha, now silent, thought about it for a second. She scanned Trel up and down. Every time she looked deep into this nigga's face, her pussy moistened. Trel reminded her of Dave East with long dreads. Nigga was so fuckin' sexy and fine, and she couldn't wait until she to get her purple, blunt-stained lips wrapped around his big dick.

If Trel was being completely truthful about his situation with his BM, Fredquisha wouldn't mind going along for the ride with her new bae. However, if it turned out he was lying, well, who knows. But a bitch like Fredquisha still might try to mess up Trel's "situation" and position herself to be the main bitch in the nigga's life.

"Fine, whatever," she succumbed. "I'll meet you downstairs…" Fredquisha said as she went over to Antoinette and Tykeisha, grabbed them and led them to the bathroom.

Inside, the three women huddled around a sink. "Bitch, I'm finna take his ass home," Fredquisha said as she rummaged her purse, looking for e-pills she bartered for pussy earlier from Deontae. Once she located her small manila, folded up envelope of pills, she opened it up, took a pill out and popped one on her tongue.

"BITCH! Ain't you pregnant?!?" Tykeisha spat and scrunched her face up when saw her bestie pop an e-pill in her mouth.

Fredquisha was now staring at herself in the mirror, sucking on the e-pill, trying to get her make up together before she was about to head back downstairs to meet up with Trel. She smacked her teeth and screwed her face up at Tykeisha's statement.

"And?" Fredquisha rolled her neck. "I'm still deciding if I wanna keep this little muhfucka or not. Shit, I already got three. Four is just doin' the most. I can't be out here getting my life boggled down with these bad ass kids."

Tykeisha's mouth flung open. "Hoe, it don't even matter! If you do keep it, you puttin' dope all up in that baby. Baby gon come out retarded."

“And, so what? If it do, that’s just some more SSI money. I can always use some extra funds. Shit, bitch, I’m tryna buy a Benz next year. Hot pink too. Match the color of this fire ass pussy I’m finna throw on this nigga.”

Tykeisha and Antoinette busted out laughing. Truth be told, Tykeisha wasn’t THAT alarmed and judgmental at Fredquisha ingesting the drug. She just was shocked that Fredquisha would be that bold and fearless to pop some XTC knowing damn well she was eight weeks into a pregnancy supposedly. “Let me get one then,” Tykeisha asked with her hand out.

“Here, bitch…” Fredquisha opened her purse and then opened the envelope of e-pills. Tykeisha stuck her fingers in the package and then placed the pill under her tongue. “ANYWAYS – you better take care of that situation quick then if you trying to snatch this nigga up. What he do? Sell dope? Rap?” Antoinette asked as she then went to adjust her dress in the mirror.

“Bitch, he said he into real estate. He just came out ‘cuz apparently B-Kilo his TiTi’s second cousin or some shit like that,” Fredquisha explained as she attempted to seal the right fake eye-lash back onto her eyelid. “Gosh, these shits are so damn cheap!” she commented, infuriated that the eye lash was somewhat slipping off.

“We’ll see though. For right now, I just wanna see with this dick do. I’ll report back to ya’ll in the AM.” Fredquisha then quickly thought that she told Mrs. Watkins Myyah needed to be back in the afternoon. But now that her “Mission: Get New Dick” was on the verge of being accomplished, she wondered if she just call up and tell Mrs. Watkins that she could keep Myyah until Monday.

School in Chicago was on the verge of letting out for the summer and Monday was a teacher’s work day. Students didn’t have to be back until Tuesday. School was scheduled to end the following week. If “Dave East with dreads” bae was going to end up being a promising situation, lots of changes around her house were going to be needed.

“Aiiight darlings, I’m finna bounce. Hit my line tomorrow!” Fredquisha closed her purse, hugged her besties and then made her way downstairs to meet up with Trel.

He was standing on the corner of the well-lit city street with his phone in his hand, checking the ETA of the Uber driver he just ordered not too long ago. “Sorry ‘bout that. It was so crowded in there,” Fredquisha apologized as she walked up to Trel and smiled. “No worries, buddy ain’t gon be here anyways for another four minutes.” Fredquisha grinned, “Cool.”

Ding! Trel looked at his phone and then looked down the street. He saw what appeared to be the white Ford Fusion belonging to Amadou, his 4.8-star rated Uber driver. “Finally,” Trel said and

pointed to the Uber driver.

The Ford Fusion pulled up to the curb of the street and its doors unlocked. Trel opened the right back passenger door for Fredquisha to get in. “Thank you!” she replied and wiggled her way into the car. Trel went to the other side and hopped in.

“How are you all tonight? Amadou the driver asked and smiled in the rear-view mirror. “By the way, you forgot to put in your address, sir…”

“Yeah, I know. I’m fine, but umm what’s your address?” Trel asked Fredquisha.

“Well, I was thinkin’ instead of my place, maybe we can go to a hotel.”

“Hotel? You got a reservation?” Trel asked.

“Nah, but nigga, don’t worry about it. Mr. Uber Driver, can you take us to the Marriot down in Hyde Park? It’s off Lake Shore and 53rd street.”

“Ok, ma’am…” Amadou responded. He quickly pulled up the Uber driver’s app on his phone and typed in the Marriot’s address. Once Google Maps got loaded and he had his directions, Amadou took off.

“One of my girls work at the hotel,” Fredquisha lied. She was going to quickly order her a room on her phone and use up some of Myyah’s SSI money to get a room.

“Well, since you got us with the room, you wanna stop and get somethin’ to eat first? White Palace right around the corner,” Trel asked as he put his arm around Fredquisha. Feeling his muscular forearm grace her neck sent a bolt of electricity down into panties, making her pussy even more wet. #winning.

“Yeah…That’s cool. I’m hungry as fuck anyways,” Fredquisha said. Bitch was always hungry.

Trel leaned forward into the front of the car. “Ay, yo bro. Stop at the White Palace off Roosevelt.”

“Ok, sir,” the thirtyish, semi-musty African Uber driver replied as he took a hard right, going against the GPS’ directions. Some minutes later, the Ford Fusion carrying the new ‘couple’ arrived at the 24/7. The goal was to grab something greasy to soak up the alcohol fermenting in their stomachs and then head to the hotel in Hyde Park, a neighborhood right off the Lake on the South Side.

“Just give us fifteen, bro. I got you with a big tip,” Trel said and handed Amadou a $20 bill so he could wait for them to get their carryout.

The couple hopped out of the car, made their way inside the restaurant and ordered their take out. A good twenty minutes later they headed back out the restaurant, hopped back into the car and then sped off to the hotel about a good fifteen minutes away.

On their way, the two not giving a fuck, started making out in the back seat. Fredquisha grazed her hand along Trel's thigh and felt his hardening meat. Her pussy of course was glowing in excitement. This nigga had to be packing at least nine, if not ten, she thought.

"Man, I'm so fuckin' hard right now. My BM ain't sucked a nigga up in ages," Trel chuckled, confessing his sex life with this children's mother was in the midst of drought. As he planted kisses up and down her neck, he slid his hand in between Fredquisha's thighs and rubbed her musty, unshaven fat pussy meat popping through her thong.

Fredquisha licked and kissed the side of Trel's tatted up neck, sending blood down to his groin at a million miles an hour. MooMoo then went to do the unthinkable; she unzipped his pants and leisurely whipped out his tanned erect dick leaking with precum.

Trel's eyes flew wide open as he was a bit terrified. He flung his gaze to the front of the car to see if Amadou was creepily observing what was happening in the back seat. "Shit, you gon get us banned from Uber!" Trel whispered.

Placing her index finger over his long lips, Fredquisha suppressed Trel's agitation. "Shhhh," she cut his mounting apprehension. Without hesitation she buried her head down into his lap and fed her mouth his hard dick. She was gonna show bae what that mouth do. Hoe is life.

Chapter Fourteen

After getting back from the dance, Mrs. Watkins woke up early that same Sunday morning and prepared a huge country breakfast for Myyah and Jonah. Despite only having about a good three hours of sleep in her body, Mrs. Watkins wanted to spend as much time as she could with her granddaughter before she was scheduled to head back to her mother's.

Mrs. Watkins whipped up some eggs, bacon, grits, French toast, hash browns and sausage. Grandma wanted to feed the girl as much as she could before she went back to her crazy ass, noncaring mother. On any other Sunday Mrs. Watkins would've gladly gone straight to early morning church service, but given she rarely had opportunities to see Myyah she decided to skip service and take her granddaughter to a local park that had a big swimming pool and water slides.

"Good mornin', grandma!" Myyah surprisingly greeted her granny as she made her way into the kitchen and watched her finish cooking breakfast.

Mrs. Watkins turned on her slipper-covered feet and produced the biggest grin at the girl. "Baby girl! I didn't expect you to be up so soon! Aren't you still tired?"

"No, not really…Sometimes I don't sleep much back home 'cuz I be afraid of the bugs in the house."

"Oh no, well…I'm afraid of bugs too. They won't bother you though."

"I know, but sometimes they crawl on me and give me nightmares."

"Crawl on you?" Mrs. Watkins screwed her face up in slight disgust.

"Yes," Myyah confessed and then quickly muzzled her mouth.

"Oh no, baby doll, it's ok, I'm not gonna tell your mother." Mrs. Watkins sensed that Myyah once again told something she wasn't supposed to be saying. She quickly tried to change the subject to qualm the girl's fear. "Anyways, how was that bed? Was it comfortable enough for you?" Mrs. Watkins asked as she chopped up cubes of butter and put them in the pot of grits she had cooking at a

low temperature on her stove.

"Yes, ma'am. I got really good sleep. The best sleep ever. The bed in Fredquisha's house is kind of bad. It hurts my back all the time…"

Mrs. Watkins raised her brow and looked strangely at her granddaughter. "Why are you calling your mother by her first name?"

With her hands behind her back, Myyah swayed side to side, a bit timid to say anything that might get her in trouble with her mother. "She said I have to call her that 'cuz its more respectful," Myyah explained.

"So, you don't her mama or mother?" Mrs. Watkins asked.

"No…I have to call her Fredquisha…"

Mrs. Watkins blood boiled like the grits on the stove just thinking what type of psychological abuse Fredquisha was possibly subjecting Myyah to on a daily basis. Given that Mrs. Watkins rarely saw Myyah, she never had enough time to probe deeply and ask Myyah what was really going on at home and if her mother was treating her well.

The rare times when Fredquisha did allow Myyah to see her grandmother, the wench only agreed to let her visit her in a public space like a mall or a Chuck E. Cheese. Hearing Myyah refer to her own mother by her first name was the first red flag raised by Fredquisha. Truth be told, there were other red flags long before this morning, but those red flags were seen from a far distance and could easily be illusive and imaginary. Well, no not really, and Mrs. Watkins knew something serious was going on over at Fredquisha's house, but she never had enough ample evidence to prove Fredquisha was being abusive or negligent.

"Ok, well, I guess. Anyways, you don't call me by my first name. You call me grandma, or granny, ok?"

"Ok, granny," Myyah smiled, lunged at her grandmother and hugged her.

"So when does my daddy get out of jail again, granny?"

"At the end of this month! He was sooo happy to get a chance to see you! He missed you so much."

"I was excited to see him too! Can I live with him when he leaves?"

Mrs. Watkins froze. She didn't know how to answer that question. She would've easily said yes, but given the precarious custody situation, she had to figure out a way to be truthful yet hopeful. "I don't know, baby girl. We will have to talk to your mother about it soon."

"Ok," Myyah responded.

"Why do you wanna live with your daddy?"

Myyah looked at her grandmother and her eyes began to water. "I just miss him, and Fredquisha won't let me see him. I ask to see him

all the time and she tells me no."

Mrs. Watkins took a huge deep breath, ready to explode. Myyah scrunched her face up. She wiped her eyes as tears almost escaped her eye ducts. "And, she just say mean things to me."

"Mean things like what?" Mrs. Watkins tone became abruptly serious.

"She says I am ugly and dumb."

"WHAT?!?"

Myyah quickly muzzled her mouth and then attempted to run off and hide. Mrs. Watkins panicked and tried to grab the girl, "Wait, Myyah, come back here! Tell me! What is your mother doing to you?"

Mrs. Watkins caught up with Myyah in the living room, grabbed her and turned her around. She got down on one knee and looked the sobbing girl in her eyes. Myyah couldn't look her grandmother straight in the face and tell her the truth about the wide scale abuse and torture her mother had been subjecting her to now for years.

"Please, baby girl, if your mother is hurting you or saying mean things to you, we need to know so that way we can fix this! If you tell me the truth it means that you can stay here with me and your daddy!" With tears of fear running down her face, Mrs. Watkins tried her best now to assure her granddaughter she had nothing to fear in confessing the abuse.

"She hurts me every day!" Myyah screamed.

"Oh My God! Don't worry. I'm going to save you from that woman. Ok?" Mrs. Watkins screeched as she wiped Myyah's tear-covered face.

After Myyah's melancholic confession and breakdown, her grandmother took her back into the kitchen and continued to probe her as she simultaneously prepared breakfast. Fuck the park. Mrs. Watkins now had to scramble against precious time to save her abused granddaughter from the fucked up trifling 'mother'.

Jonah eventually came downstairs and into the kitchen. After Mrs. Watkins got Myyah situated with watching a Disney movie, she took her son to the side to tell him what Myyah relayed to her about the abuse that had been going on in Fredquisha's apartment. Mrs. Watkins almost had to hold Jonah back from taking off into his car to go confront Fredquisha. She told him if they were going to save Myyah, they needed to go through the appropriate legal channels. The last thing she wanted to do was break the law and further dig herself along with Myyah and Austin into a deeper hole.

The morning shifted into the afternoon, and Mrs. Watkins was literally walking on pins and needles. She needed to come up with a very quick plan on how she was going to liberate Myyah from the abusive clutches of Fredquisha.

12: 45 PM splashed across the microwave clock in the kitchen.

Mrs. Watkins sat in her dining room table, contemplating her next move. Time was no longer on her side. At any moment she needed to begin to get Myyah's belongings ready. The original plan was to go straight to the park right after breakfast, but now with this new-found revelation, Mrs. Watkins needed to shift gears and get a solution to this dark problem facing her granddaughter. Then the idea hit her – she was going to call up Alton Jones, Austin's former criminal attorney, and see what could be done.

Despite it being Sunday, she pulled out her cell phone and then went into her contact's list and pulled up Alton's name. And just when she was about to hit dial…

Ring. Ring. Ring.

"FREDQUISHA" popped up on her cell phone. The sadistic mother was calling her. Why? Mrs. Watkins wondered. She told Fredquisha she was going to drop Myyah off by 5 PM. It wasn't even one yet. Why was she checking in. Mrs. Watkins took a deep, hard breath through her nostrils and swiped right.

"Hey, Fredquisha…" Mrs. Watkins whispered. She didn't want Myyah to hear she was on the phone with her mother.

~

Fredquisha yawned and stretched… "Hey, Mrs. Watkins, I was callin' 'cuz I know I said you had to drop Myyah off at 5 PM…" MooMoo smiled and then looked at Trel sleeping like a baby in the hotel bed, "But I was wondering since you barely get to see her if you wanted her to stay with you until tomorrow night. She gotta be back to school by Tuesday."

Mrs. Watkins jumped at the sound of hearing Fredquisha offer Myyah to stay longer. "YEAH! Sure thing! I mean, are you sure? This isn't some trap or game you trying to play, is it?" Mrs. Watkins was taken completely off guard.

"No, no game. I just had a late night last night and then I still got other stuff to do. I got a job interview tomorrow down at Wal-Mart that I need to prepare for anyways," Fredquisha lied. Well, lied about the job interview down at Wal-Mart. She was being completely truthful about her "long" night with Trel.

"Well, ok, if you say so, I can definitely keep her until tomorrow…"

"Alrighty then, well, I guess I'll see you tomorrow then."

"Ok, Fredquisha…"

"See ya'll later—"

Mrs. Watkins suddenly interrupted before Fredquisha was about to get off the phone and asked, "Hey Fredquisha, if you ever want Myyah

to stay with us for much longer because you just need more time to yourself, we are more than willing to help out. I know you and Austin have had your troubles and you still raising your two other cute boys. I know Myyah can be a handful."

Fredquisha, naked and scratching her hairy, sperm-crusted cooch, rolled her eyes. She mumbled, "Mrs. Watkins. Thanks for the help, but I got it. Trust me. Maybe I can see about sending her more often."

"Ok, Fredquisha. Anyways, enjoy the rest of your day and I'll tell your daughter you said hello and that you miss her,"

"Bye, Mrs. Watkins." Fredquisha hung up and threw the phone back into her bag sitting on top of the hotel room's dresser.

MooMoo jiggled her way back over to the bed, hopped in and snuggled up next to Trel. "Sorry about that, you ready for round eight?"

"Damn, girl, yo pussy ain't sore?" Trel jokingly growled as he wiped his mouth.

"Baby, this pussy has short recovery time. Come on!"

~

"Myyah! Baby girl! I got some good news! Fredquisha is gonna let you stay for another day."

"Did you tell her what I told you?" Myyah asked, looking scared.

"No, baby girl. Not at all. But we are gonna fix this, ok?"

"Ok…"

"Anyways, let's go get ready to go to the park! And afterwards we can go get some funnel cake! Have you had funnel cake before?"

"No, what's that?"

"It's fried dough. It's like one big waffle with ice cream, chocolate syrup, whip cream, with a cherry on top!"

"That sounds good!"

Myyah got up from the couch. She and Mrs. Watkins headed upstairs so she could get changed out of her clothes and into appropriate swimwear for the park. Once the two women got ready, Mrs. Watkins called for a Lyft ride to the park. The two women spent the rest of the day relishing in fun, trying their best to oblivious to all of the madness going on in Myyah's life.

Chapter Fifteen

Early Monday morning. The melodic singing of birds chirping outside could be faintly heard as the sun rose to devour the suburban Chicago skies.

7:23 AM blinked on the oven's clock. After making a big pot of coffee, Mrs. Watkins wasted in no time in trying to strategize on how she was going to liberate her granddaughter from Fredquisha. She sat down at her desk inside of her office, took three gulps from her big mug of Ethiopian fair trade black coffee, and pulled out a yellow legal pad and a black ink pen. Once she got situated and comfortable to jot down notes, websites, phone numbers, etc., she pulled out her phone and called Attorney Alton Jones.

Now, any other person would've moved quickly to call the Illinois Department of Children and Family Services. But that wasn't the route that Mrs. Watkins wanted to take just yet. She figured there had to be some sort of legal maneuver she could use in order to fight the custody agreement. There had to be, she assumed. She also wondered if perhaps she called 911 and had Myyah recount her testimony to the police, that would trigger some sort of immediate investigation which then in turn perhaps Mrs. Watkins could get a protective order against the mother and fight the custody agreement. Instant victory.

Nevertheless, Mrs. Watkins quickly realized even if all that went through, she nor Austin were Myyah's legal guardians and the judge would have no plausible grounds to award custody of Myyah over to her. There was the very REAL possibility that if the police and ultimately the courts took Myyah out of Fredquisha's custody, they would then default to hand over custody to Myyah's maternal grandmother – Fredquisha's mother – not Mrs. Watkins. That definitely was not a desired outcome either.

Calling up Alton was the first thing Mrs. Watkins wanted to do just to get some quick legal advice. Although the call was probably a crapshoot, it was at least worth a try.

Ring. Ring. Ring. Ring.

"Good Morning, Alton Jones," the family friend and powerhouse attorney answered the phone.

Mrs. Watkins quickly cleared her throat. “Hey, Mr. Jones, this is Delores. Austin’s mother.”

“Oh, hey Delores. Why are you calling me this early? Something happened again to Austin?”

“No, it’s actually not about Austin. It’s about his daughter.... Myyah.”

“The six or seven-year-old girl of his?”

“Six – she’ll be seven in a few more months… But yes, her.”

“What seems to be the issue.”

“Well, I have her staying with me right now for the weekend. Her mother barely lets me see her because of this crazy ass custody agreement. Myyah just told me yesterday that her mother hits her and calls her all types of crazy names. She told me she wants to li—”

Alton interrupted, “Wait, wait, wait Delores. You know I respect you and I’m always there for you and your family, but first, family law is definitely out of my wheelhouse of experience.” He continued, “Secondly, I’m just gonna be completely honest with you. I know exactly where you’re going with this, and before you attempt to make any moves to fight to get the girl in your custody, just know you’re going to need more than Myyah’s ‘word’ to make a judge bust a move and hand over custody.”

“I know, Alton. Listen, I know. But she was crying and sobbing yesterday. Telling me these crazy stories of how she calls her all types of hoes and bitches. How she sometimes starves her!”

“Wow…She said all of this?”

“Yes! I am not making this up! I don’t think she would make this up either! And then when I went to go pick her up on Friday, I had a chance to see her mother’s place! It was absolutely filthy! I mean the bitch had trash splattered all over the fucking place. Roaches were climbing on the walls and shit! I mean, excuse my language…”

Alton grumbled, “It’s alright, listen…I’m sorry if I was about to cut you off and sound short, it’s just that I get a lot of these calls and I’m already ready with a script. You won’t believe how many calls I get from baby mamas, grandmas, even some baby daddies who have nothing more than mere allegations. And a lot of times it’s just people trying to get revenge on their ex-spouses or family members they aren’t currently getting along with…”

“Look, I understand all that completely, but I need to act fast, Alton. I just didn’t know who else to call or what else to do first.”

“Well, hell, first have you tried to report her to DCFS? I mean, that’s the first place I would call. If Myyah doesn’t have any visible marks on her body that can signal assault or trauma, it’s her word versus her mother’s. You’d need witnesses. Up until this point it doesn’t sound like you have any of that. Do you?”

Mrs. Watkins exhaled, “No, I don’t.”

“See there…I am not trying to be pessimistic or anything, but you are dealing with the government here. Even if the good Lord Jesus came down from the sky right now and told DCFS and a family judge they need to hand over custody, you still need documentation. Document. Document. Document. Try to get as much evidence you can before you try to move in on the woman.”

Mrs. Watkins rolled her eyes, “I understand,”

“Good, well, anyways…Normally I would’ve billed for this call, but seeing as how you all are a family friend and what not and a case like this I wouldn’t even take up, I’ll let you all slide. Other than that, if you need a family lawyer, one of my cousins, Stacy Perkins up on the North Side in the city handles complex cases like this all the time. I’ll text you her info. Sounds great?”

“That’ll work, sir. I really appreciate it…”

“No worries. I’ll text you. I’ll send you that info once I get out of this trial.”

“Thank you.”

“Have a good day, Delores.”

“You too, Alton…”

Mrs. Watkins hung up the phone. “Motherfucker,” she grumbled, rolling her eyes and shaking her head.

The only thing Delores could do next, and per the recommendation of Alton, was call DCFS.

She was conflicted. As a former special education teacher, she knew could’ve easily called DCFS and had a caseworker sent out to Fredquisha’s apartment, but she also was very much aware of DCFS’s reputation as moving at the speed of molasses dripping from a tall redwood tree.

Hell, by the time DCFS sent a caseworker out to Fredquisha’s house there was a real possibility that Myyah would endure more rounds of abuse and torture. With nothing else to do or lose, Mrs. Watkins then stormed to the DCFS website and called the 1-800 child abuse hotline.

Rapidly tapping her fingers against her desk, breathing hard, gazing off into the computer screen, her phone kept ringing and ringing. Finally, the DCFS prompt kicked in.

“Thank you for calling the Illinois Department of Children and Family Services’ 24/7 child abuse hotline. To speak with a live representative in regard to a possible child abuse incident, press 1. To speak with a representative about a preexisting case, press 2. For all other inquiries, please remaining on the line.”

Mrs. Watkins quickly dialed “1”. Ring. Ring. Ring. Ring.

“Thank you for calling the Illinois Department of Children and Family Services’ Child Abuse Hotline, this is Cheryl, are you call in to

report a new case of child abuse?"

"Yes, I am."

"Ok, ma'am. And what is the name of the child?"

"Her name is Myyah Chennelle Watkins."

"How old is she?"

"She's 6."

"And who are you in relationship to her?"

"I am her paternal grandmother."

"What is the child's name?"

"Fredquisha Pierce."

"How old is she? I believe around my son's age. 35"

"And what's your son's name?"

"Austin Watkins."

"And he's the established biological father?"

"Yes, I believe so…"

"Ok, and where is he currently?"

"He's…" Mrs. Watkins took a deep breath and exhaled, "He's currently incarcerated."

"Ok, and I am assuming the mother has full custody?"

"Yes, ma'am…"

"Ok, so where does Myyah live? She lives with her mother in the city or in the suburbs?"

"She lives in the City of Chicago."

"Do you know the mother's address?"

"Yes, it's 6310 S Halsted Avenue, Apartment 3B, Chicago, Illinois."

"Got it."

"Ok, so I am going to ask you a series of questions. Half of those questions will require a numerical response on a scale of 1-5, with 1 being 'not likely' and 5 being 'very likely'. Afterwards, a senior case manager with the department will evaluate your responses and from there determine if a home visit is necessary, is that ok?"

"Yes…that's fine."

Mrs. Watkins and Cheryl, the phone case manager, went back and forth. Mrs. Watkins tried her best to answer the questions truthfully based on what Myyah told her yesterday. Her nerves on fire, Mrs. Watkins hoped that the information would lead to some sort of immediate child services investigation. But overwrought with doubt and pessimism, Mrs. Watkins just knew it was going to be days, possibly weeks before something happened.

"Alright, ma'am, well that concludes all the questions I have. As mentioned before a child services caseworker will evaluation the questionnaire and from there make a determination as to whether or not a home visit is required. If you don't have any other questions, I will conclude the call now. Do you have any last questions?"

“How long do you think it’ll take before someone comes out?”

“Well, that will depend on the severity of the abuse and what a caseworker thinks may warrant an immediate home visit and possible referral to the Chicago Police Department for further investigation. It could be a day, it could be a week. Nonetheless, if you feel like the child’s life is in danger, police call 9-11 immediately, ok?”

“Ok, ma’am. Thank you so much.”

“You’re welcome. Have a wonderful day…”

“You too.”

Mrs. Watkins hung up the phone. Still rapidly tapping her well-manicured fingers against her desk, she glanced down at the computer screen and saw that it was almost 8 AM. Myyah was still sleep. Grandma knew she had to take her granddaughter back to her mother’s apartment tonight. Still with the day to figure out a plan, Mrs. Watkins then glanced down at her phone again. She was tempted to do what she felt deep down in her intuition was the best thing to do.

She picked her phone back up and dialed 911.

Chapter Sixteen

"Mrs. Watkins…Detective Jackson will see you now," one of the Matteson police station officers caught Mrs. Watkins' attention. Sitting by herself, she was reading some local magazine as she sat in the cold, relatively empty suburban police station.

After calling 911 to go ahead and try to file some sort of child abuse charge against Fredquisha, Mrs. Watkins was informed she needed to bring Myyah and herself down to the station to speak with Det. Lawrence Jackson, a detective assigned to investigate child abuse charges. There, Det. Jackson would conduct an interview with Mrs. Watkins and Myyah to see if the allegations had any merit and then inform them what the next course of action would be.

Mrs. Watkins looked at the short, black female officer and produced an anxious gawp, "Thank you." She stood up and shadowed the officer to Detective Jackson's office.

Moments later Mrs. Watkins along with the female officer arrived at Detective Jackson's office. The detective had spent the last hour and a half along with a child psychologist to help sort through the allegations being levied against Fredquisha in regard to her abuse.

Knock. Knock.

The officer lightly knocked on the Detective's door. "Come on in," Det. Jackson responded. The officer opened the door and escorted Mrs. Watkins in.

"Have a seat Mrs. Watkins. Dr. Nunez, can you take Ms. Myyah here with you while I talk to Mrs. Watkins in private?" Det. Jackson asked the child psychologist and licensed clinical social worker, Dr. Maria Nunez.

Det. Jackson was a 10-year veteran with the Matteson Police Department. After being a beat officer for five years, he then went on to become one of the chief non-homicide detectives in the small suburban police force.

"Yes! Come on baby doll. I have lots of coloring books and candy in my office! You wanna go color?" the chubby and twentyish Dr. Nunez asked Myyah.

"Yes, ma'am!" Myyah innocently responded.

Myyah then twirled her attention towards her grandmother and formed a slightly edgy face.

"Don't worry, baby girl. Grandma just needs to talk to this nice police officer, ok?"

"Ok," she replied and then gave granny a hug.

Once Myyah and Dr. Nunez departed the office, Det. Jackson and Mrs. Watkins had privacy.

Det. Jackson, in his early 40s, looking like a mean Cuba Gooding Jr., took a huge deep breath in, and then exhaled. It was an exhale marked with slight hint of frustration. He scoured over his notes and then gave Mrs. Watkins a look. A look that she just knew he was going to relay some possibly depressing news.

"So, Mrs. Watkins, we definitely have a case here…" he muttered.

"So, what happens next then?" Mrs. Watkins grew tense at the sound that something could possibly be done to immediately save the girl.

"Well, unfortunately right now…. Nothing."

"Wait, what? You just said we have a case though."

"Yeah, we have a case. But in order for the case to have legs and move to rescue you the girl, here is what needs to happen. First, we have to relay this information over to DCFS. They have investigate these child abuse allegations. These investigations can vary in time. Some move slow. Some very fast. Very fast depending on the severity of the abuse allegations and the evidence they collect." He continued, "Unfortunately in Myyah's case, all we have is her word. The girl doesn't have any substantial markings that show physical violence, trauma, assault or any other types of incriminating evidence that would make a Chicago police officer arrest her mother, Fredquisha."

Mrs. Watkins quickly shook her head in disbelief, "No, no, no. Detective, I get all that. But if the girl is saying that her mother has been hitting her, psychologically abusing her, and doing all types of crazy stuff to her, are we just supposed to sit back and let her suffer like this until some government agency decides to act?"

"Trust me, Mrs. Watkins. I'm there with you – but unfortunately this is the law. I can't circumvent that based on hearsay. And hearsay is all we have right now coming from a six-year-old. We would still need to talk to Fredquisha and get her side of the story. Then we would also have to interview witnesses. Oh, and by the way…This entire case is out of my jurisdiction. I'd then have to refer this over to a detective at the Chicago Police Department."

"So, should I go there now before it's too late?" Mrs. Watkins asked.

"Well, I mean, you can. But even then, they will tell you the same thing. I can always have Dr. Nunez type up a report and give those

notes over to CPD. But they are going to do the same thing…And truth be told, they are going to move much slower than us. CPD is overwhelmed with child abuse allegations."

"So, in other words Myyah is fucked. That's what's your telling me."

Det. Jackson lowered his head. "No, I am not saying that at all. But what I am saying is Mrs. Watkins we need to give this time and we can't impulsively act and make her situation worse. I mean, the reality is that you nor her father have any type of shared custody with Fredquisha. In the event the police were to remove the girl from the home, she'd go live with her other grandmother or another designated guardian. I mean, the judge MIGHT consider handing you custody, but for that to happen, you need to lawyer up and get someone who can prove you are a better suited guardian than Fredquisha's family."

"This is…just too much. This girl has been telling me now for the last two days that she doesn't want to go back home, and yet there is nothing we can do to stop her from going into what she says is clearly an abusive situation."

"I know, I'm sorry Mrs. Watkins. But the law is the law. Right now, all we have is hearsay. DCFS needs to conduct an investigation. Then, they will then determine what's the next course of action. In the meantime, my suggestion would be to just to pray, get a good family lawyer and get ready to battle for the girl."

Mrs. Watkins closed her eyes, almost wanting to release tears. She reopened them and noticed Det. Jackson reaching out to shake her hand. She stuck hers out and shook his hand. The both of them stood up in silence. Det. Jackson then led her out of the door and to Dr. Nunez office.

Dr. Nunez had a small office she shared with another investigator. Since she was a per diem child abusive investigator and social worker for the police station, she used the office from time to time in matters similar to Myyah's.

"Oh, hey! Look it's your grandma! All set?" Dr. Nunez chirped as she turned her attention towards Mrs. Watkins and Det. Jackson.

"Yeah. Like I said Mrs. Watkins, just hold out for now and pray. Here's my card if you need anything," Det. Jackson consoled as he handed Mrs. Watkins his business card.

"Come on, baby girl. We gotta leave now."

"Does this mean I get to stay with you now grandma?"

Chapter Seventeen

Once Mrs. Watkins and her granddaughter left the police station without an immediate resolution to their growing quandary, the grandmother-would be-super heroine called for a Lyft to take them back home. They'd arrived twenty maters later. A solemn and depressed Mrs. Watkins walked inside her immaculate, virtually empty and dark house and didn't hesitate in beginning the process of packing up Myyah's belongings.

Jonah was upstairs taking a quick nap and hadn't noticed his mother's arrival. He just got off from a shift at his job. About an hour passed, and as minutes faded into an hour, time drew closer to that moment where they'd have to leave and take Myyah back home. Jonah awakened hoping his mother had some sort of resolution. He made his way to his mother's room where she was packing up some clothes in a small suitcase she bought for Myyah at Wal-Mart.

"So, what's the deal, mama?" Jonah asked

"I gotta take her back. No signs of trauma. No evidence of abuse, at least not yet. We gotta abide by the custody order until DCFS completes their investigation and hopefully refer their findings over to the police. From there, they can arrest Fredquisha, but then Myyah won't come here. She'd have to go stay with Fredquisha's mother or some other relative until we can fight to regain custody."

Jonah lowered his head, "Mama, I'm so sorry…"

"It's cool. We're gonna get her, god damn it. This is such fucking bullshit. This is just so fucked up. God damn inefficient government can't do shit. This is why all of these kids end up dying from abuse," Mrs. Watkins began to cry.

Jonah walked into the room and hugged his mother. "Mama, she ain't gonna die. We're gonna get her, ok? Don't cry. You gon make me cry," Jonah confessed.

"I'm sorry. You're right. I can't cry. We gotta be strong for Myyah," Mrs. Watkins replied as she released her embrace from Jonah and finished packing the carry-on suitcase.

Mrs. Watkins had no other choice unfortunately at this point but to return Myyah back to her mother. Once she had everything ready to

go, Mrs. Watkins went into the living room where Myyah was watching “Princess And The Frog”.

“Alright, baby girl, we gotta go now.”

“Ok,” a solemn Myyah responded.

~

7:34 PM blinked on the dashboard of Jonah’s idle car.

“Alright, missy, we got all of your stuff ready to go. Remember, don’t tell your mother anything that happened today or what you told me. I am not going to tell her or anyone else. I am going to try my best to get you out of her house and home with me and your daddy, ok?” Mrs. Watkins was helping Myyah into the backseat of Jonah’s car.

Jonah, in the front seat, was looking tense and angry, almost as if he was ready to kill Fredquisha once they got to bitch’s apartment on 63rd street.

“Ok,” Myyah replied, appearing grief-stricken.

“It’s gonna be alright, trust me. If your mother tries to hit you or do anything, you call the police or tell someone at your school, ok?”

“Ok…”

“Ok, good.”

“And if your brothers hit you too, Myyah, call the police,” Jonah interjected.

“Ok, uncle…”

For the entire duration of the car ride, Myyah, depressed and frozen, just peered out of the window, watching the same suburban scenery that once made her happy now make her sad. She was being exiled from heavenly comfort of her grandmother’s abode and now was forced to trudge back into the depths of her dark, ghetto, abusive, roach-infested hellish existence with her so-called ‘mother’.

Once the Watkins family made their way into the city, billions of butterflies formed in the pits of Myyah’s stomach, fluttering their wings, brewing deep-seated anxiety in the abused girl’s core. Seeing the gradual transition from idyllic suburban scenery to horrid, derelict city life on the South Side wasn’t just gut-wrenching; it was heart breaking.

Although Myyah didn’t know that much about God, she did her best last night to pray to her sense of a higher power, pleading for someone to save her. Granny from time to time would tell her God sees, listens and can do any and everything, so Myyah just knew her salvation was on the way since God heard her cries. Saw her pain and suffering at the hands of her mother.

However, now that her granny insisted she had to go back home

since her efforts at saving her failed, Myyah doubted if God even loved her.

Jonah pulled off to the side of Fredquisha's building and parked. Sunday evenings seemed relatively peaceful despite being in this part of town. The dusky skies turned orange. The sun began to fade away. So did any sense of contentment Myyah had. It was now gone as her innocent doe eyes attached to the cruddy building.

"Like I said baby girl, we are gonna work to fix this situation and get you out. Please, baby girl, do not do anything or say anything to your mother that might make her go crazy,"

"Grandma, please, don't make me go inside there. I can't. I am just too scared. Please!"

"Baby girl, there's nothing I can do. I can't take you with me!" Mrs. Watkins tried her best to explain, but Myyah was relentless with her begging.

"Granny, please! I'll do anything. Can I just not hide at your place?"

"No, baby girl! You can't hide at my place! Your mother unfortunately has to have you for the time being until we work to solve this entire ordeal for you!"

"Grandma, please, no, NO! Please!" Myyah kept at it, sobbing and weeping. The more her cries thundered in the car, the guiltier Mrs. Watkins felt. She couldn't in good faith just hand over the child to a mother who she knew was completely incapable of raising the girl.

Jonah gawked at his mother, "Mama, we have to take her up there."

"I know, but we can't take her up there crying. Fredquisha will know something is wrong and then she might do something even crazier."

"So, what do you wanna do then?"

Mrs. Watkins exhaled and closed her eyes as a tear escaped her left eye. She shook and lowered her head as she held her mouth with her hand. "I don't know, I don't know what we should do Jonah. I can't send her up there. It's just ain't right.

"I know, but mama, we gotta bring her up there. If we don't, Fredquisha is gonna call the police and we're gonna get in trouble."

Mrs. Watkins reopened her eyes as she felt her heart beat faster and faster. She scanned the surrounding area, absorbing the backdrop of blight mixed in with roaming crackheads and crazies. This wasn't the type of environment Myyah, let alone any kid, needed to be reared in. Not only was Fredquisha an abomination, but so was this neighborhood.

"Jonah, turn the car back on and let's leave…."

"What?!? Mama, no! We can't do that! I know we don't want

Myyah in that house, but mama, we are breaking the law now. This is technically kidnapping."

"Jonah…" Mrs. Watkins turned her head towards her youngest son. "Drive this fucking car…NOW!"

Jonah lowered his head and turned on the engine of the car. He nervously looked around. "Mama, are you sure you wanna do this?"

"Yes, I'm sure…Fuck the law. I'll go to jail before my granddaughter goes into that hell hole."

Nervous and trembling, Jonah gawked at his emboldened mother. "I would too, mama. I would too. You're right. Fuck that. I'll go to jail too!"

Suddenly Jonah took off into the sunset, barreling down Halsted Avenue, back to Matteson. Myyah's cries diminished. Maybe God does answer prayers, she thought.

Chapter Eighteen

Earlier that day…2:30 PM.

On Sundays there was a group of inmates who were just returning from their respective religious services. Ironically most inmates didn't bother to attend the small Catholic and Baptist church services hosted every Sunday late morning. Many locked up felt disillusioned with organized religion. Only a few inmates, those who wanted to hold out last hope in Jesus to save them from potentially long prison sentences, attended the Christian services held on site.

Nevertheless, despite the many who didn't bother to show up to hear some secretly gay white priest give some dry lecture or some bucktooth, greasy jheri curl having pastor hoop and holler, the jail actually had a growing Nation of Islam (NOI) and Orthodox Islam Muslim population. Many Black, even some Hispanic inmates gravitated towards Allah and called Muhammad ibn Abdullah their last prophet as they found solace in the desert religion's strict discipline, sense of unity and militancy. Almost kind of like gang culture – Islam had a strong focus on warrior hood. Muslims fought hard for what they believed in and didn't just back down.

The Islamic religion was kind of inspiration for Austin himself. He had been flirting off and on with the idea of becoming a Muslim now for some years, but never took it that serious. He always found himself distracted with street shit. However, now that he was locked up and on the verge of getting released, Austin was attending services every Sunday to give himself the spiritual boost needed to ignite the process of self-transformation.

A sunny, gusty afternoon…One of Austin's buddies, Terrence, better known as 'Bro. Terrence 3X" usually brought Austin to the NOI's study group religious service inside the jail. Bro. Terrence had been locked up now for almost five years, awaiting sentencing in a double homicide. Although he claimed he was innocent, set up by a rival gang for a drug trade gone wrong, Terrence was now facing life in prison for the murder of nineteen-year-old well known rapper and his seventeen-year-old girlfriend.

"As-Salaamu Alaikum, my dear brother. So nice to see you again…"

"Wa 'Alaikum As-Salaam Brother," Terrence said as he returned the greetings of peace back to one of his Muslim brothers. He kissed the short, light skinned, chubby man on each cheek as he shook his hand. "This is my friend by the way, Brother Austin. Austin, this is Minister Shaheed 2X. He used to be an inmate some years ago and

moved to Dallas! How's that Texas life treating you, sir?"

"It's treating me fine. So much better than this god-forsaken Chi-town. Brothers killing each other left and right out here!"

Minister Shaheed 2X was an ex-inmate who had at one point in time been in and out of County for petty, non-violent crimes like drug trade. After deciding to get his life right, he joined the NOI, rose the ranks to becoming a minister, and then eventually moved to Texas where he got married and had two young sons. From time to time when Minister Shaheed came back into Chicago to visit family, he would volunteer on Sundays to assist with the study group's service. Unlike the other inmates wearing orange jumpsuits, Minister Shaheed 2X was rocking an all-black suit, white dress shirt, red bow tie and shiny black shoes.

Austin reached out to shake Minister Shaheed's hand. "As-Salaam Alaikum, brother," Austin nervously smiled. He didn't know if he was saying the Muslim greeting correctly.

Since being locked up, Austin was so close to finally becoming a Muslim and a registered member with the Nation of Islam. However, he was still on the fence given his Christian upbringing. He definitely believed in God, but being out in the streets, seeing so many people killed, made him question the Church, Jesus and the very Christian values his parents instilled him at an early age.

"Well, my brother, I gotta get going. I've been fasting all day. Stay strong, brothers," Minister Shaheed smiled and then walked away.

"He's a good brother. Good role model," Terrence commented as he and Austin began to walk out of the small conference room. As the two made their way towards the exit, Terrence turned his head towards Austin as they finished their light conversation as they walked back to their cells. "…Anyways, like I was saying my brother, Minister Farrakhan be havin' that fire, for real for real. I can get you most of those DVDs from the 90s. Farrakhan was on it real hard back then, bro,"

"Aiight, man, I appreciate it. I'll check those joints out. Just let me know and I'll send you some cash for the DVDs," Austin replied as the two kept pacing themselves down the well-lit hallway.

"Bet. Anyways, I'm finna go chill in the library before dinner. You wanna come?"

"Sure, I ain't got shit else to do. I need to go pick up some more college course catalogues anyways."

"Aiight then…"

The two men then sojourned around the corner to the jail library. Since both Terrence and Austin were locked up in a low-security detention center, inmates were given a lot more latitude as to where they could go. Jail corrections offers weren't as thick in their presence

compared to other medium and high-risk security detention centers within the massive county jail complex. This particular detention center that Austin was housed in had security cameras being situated all over the place to record any suspicious activity. Any craziness that went down would then warrant a response from the jail guards.

As soon as Terrence and Austin entered the library, barely filled with inmates, they made their way over to a long aisle of tall bookshelves. Many of the bookshelves were lined with books as old as Abraham Lincoln. While Terrence looked for something to read, Austin scoured up and down the aisle looking for his course catalogues.

A corrections officer, who unbeknownst to the men, had been following them, entered the aisle and slowly crept up behind Terrence.

"My brother, my brother, my brother, look who we have here…the infamous Terrence 3X aka Lil Terry…Still lookin' the same from when you used to hustle 79th and Jeffrey," the tall, slender dark-skinned corrections officer with a shiny bald head growled at Terrence.

The moment Austin heard the menacing words pour out of the correction officer's mouth, he spun his head in the direction of Terrence and the office. His eyes widened with slight anxiety and immediately stood up. He continued to gawk at a now frozen Terry and the threatening officer. He'd never seen the jail guard before.

Looking panicky as hell, Austin's eyes turned to curious slits as he tried to quickly figure out what was going on between Terrence and this officer. The jail guard snickered, scanning both the Muslim brother and his comrade, Austin, up and down.

"Oh, so that's the fuck shit you on, bro?" Terrence replied.

"Yeah, that's the fuck shit I'm on. You fucked up, boy. On fo'nem I'm finna send yo ass straight to the grave, fuck boy," the officer growingly spat back to Terrence. "Fo'nem" was a reference to "Folks and them" – a term heavily used by gang members on the south side to refer to the Folk Nation, which was an alliance of between the Black Disciples, Gangster Disciples, Latin Disciples and a few other lesser known street gangs throughout the Chicago metro.

"Yo, what the fuck is going on, sir?" Austin interjected as he stood there completely confused and worried. How did this particular corrections officer know of Terrence and why was he bringing up street shit inside the jail?

"Don't worry 'bout it. I suggest you dip the fuck out while I take care of this fake ass Muslim unless you wanna get fucked up too," The officer said, looking straight at Austin.

All of sudden the corrections officer whipped out a small shiny hunter's knife. Something that looked like it could bring death in one

swipe. Terrence tried to dash off, but before he could the corrections officer grabbed him and shanked him several times in the back.

"AHH! AHHHH!" Terrence cried as he collapsed to the ground.

Austin stood there frozen for a second as the officer continued to dig into Terrence's back. Suddenly he felt the need to intervene, "No! Fuck no!" Austin screamed as he lunged at the officer.

The two men then found themselves locked in an intense battle of life and death. With motionless Terrence slowly losing life, bleeding out on the ground, Austin and the corrections officer meandered their struggle out into the middle of the library's floor. A few other inmates were around to see what was happening, but they ducked and hid, not wanting to intervene.

"YO! WHO THE FUCK ARE YOU?!?" Austin roared, finding himself trying to grab the knife out of the man's bloodied hand.

The corrections officer didn't respond. He just stood there, fighting, trying his best to wrestle for domination and control in the fight. Both men suddenly fell to the ground. As they continued to tussle back and forth, Austin conjured up enough strength to roll the man over. He quickly let the murderous corrupt corrections officer go for a brief moment, threw a few punches into the man's face and the arm that held the knife. Without even thinking Austin grabbed the knife and began to slice away at the man's neck. Blood splattered all over, even on Austin. As the corrections officer clung for his life, spewing out crimson blood from the open wound gaping in the middle of his neck, Austin stood up with the knife in his hand and gawked down at the dying corrections officer.

"WATKINS! PUT THE KNIFE DOWN OR WE WILL SHOOT!" One of two guards standing feet away from Austin screamed towards Austin. Both guards had semi-automatic rifles pointed at the man.

"DROP THE FUCKING KNIFE IN YOUR HAND AND GET DOWN ON YOUR KNEES! NOW!"

Austin, completely shook up and terrified, muttered, "It's not what you think. I was def—"

"WE ARE GOING TO TELL YOU ONE LAST TIME WATKINS! GET DOWN!"

"No, Officer! PLEASE! IT'S NOT WHAT YOU—"

POW! POW! POW!

~

"Aiight, boys, give granny a hug!" Evelyn, Fredquisha's mama laughed as she went in to give her two grandsons a big hug.

Evelyn looked like a 52-year-old version of Fredquisha, just shorter, fatter and dumpier. Her edges from the sides of her head went

missing like some white bitch that went jogging in a forest at 3 AM.

"Mama, can you watch them next week? I got a date on Saturday."

"Bitch, you always got a date. What's the difference this time? I hope he got some real money and ain't some dope dealin' loser that you seemed to be so attracted to."

Fredquisha rolled her eyes. "Bitch, bye. The niggas I fuck with are winnin'. Can't say that about the sorry ass old, fuck niggas you used throw that pussy on back in the day."

"Girl! If that's the case, you got sorry in yo ho ass blood, 'cuz ya daddy was a sorry mothafucka. Anyways, bitch, let me get a cigarette…"

Fredquisha chuckled. Her and her mother were truly besties and despite the somewhat troubling words they were exchanging between one another, they were really joking. Their ratchet talk of men was how they bonded with one another.

Fredquisha, her mama along with her two sons, Quimani and Zy'meer, were standing outside on the corner of the street, just about to go back inside the roach-infested apartment. As ratchet mama rummaged her purse to pull out her pack of Newports to hand her mama Evelyn a square, a silver Nissan Altima zoomed up the street and came to a screeching halt at the corner where the ratchet Pierce family had been standing. Fredquisha gazed into the car and recognized Paulette, one of her besties and her 'hairdresser', and her fifteen-year-old daughter, Quantayzia, in the passenger seat.

All of sudden Paulette hopped out the driver's seat.

"GET OUT BITCH! FUCK IS YOU DOIN'?!? DON'T BE SCARED NOW, HOE!" The enraged hairdresser bestie screamed at her daughter who looked terrified, still sitting in the passenger seat.

"Fuck is goin' on, Paulette?!?" Fredquisha nervously asked as she goggled at her friend damn near drag her daughter out of the passenger seat of the car.

"BITCH! TELL HER WHAT YOU JUST TOLD ME!" Paulette commanded her daughter. Quantayzia looked like she'd seen the ghost of Michael Jackson or some shit. She looked around, huffed and then stared at Fredquisha.

"LIL GIRL, IF YOU DON'T TELL HER WHAT YOU JUST TOLD ME I'M FINNE FUCK YOU UP!"

Quantayzia began to cry. "I'm pregnant…"

"Ok?" Fredquisha was silent and confused. Why was this big news to her?'

"TELL HER BITCH! EVERYTHING! TELL HER WHO THE DADDY IS!"

Quantayzia lowered her head and slowly swayed side from side.

"Quimani…"

“Bitch!?! What?!?! Quimani!” Fredquisha spat back with a scrunched up face.

“YES BITCH! YOUR TWELVE-YEAR-OLD BAD, FAT ASS SON GOT MY DAUGHTER PREGNANT!”

Chapter Nineteen

"BITCH! TELL HER WHAT YOU JUST TOLD ME!" Paulette commanded her daughter.

The way Quantayzia stood there motionless, her mouth partly hung open, you would've thought this little fast ass heffa had seen the ghost of Michael Jackson or some shit. She looked around, panted and nervously glowered at Fredquisha.

Paulette sensed her daughter's trepidation but fuck all that. This fast lil coochie havin' girl better say something before Paulette goes crazy. "LIL GIRL, IF YOU DON'T TELL HER WHAT YOU JUST TOLD ME, I'M FINNA FUCK YOU UP!"

Quantayzia began to cry. "I'm pregnant…," she confessed, somewhat muzzling her mouth with her clammy hands. Red fingernail paint chipping off her fingernails.

"Ok?" Fredquisha was silent and confused. Why was this big news to her?'

"TELL HER, LITTLE BITCH! EVERYTHING! TELL HER WHO THE DADDY IS!"

Quantayzia lowered her head and slowly swayed side from side.

"Quimani…"

"Bitch!?! What?!?! Quimani!" Fredquisha spat back with a scrunched up face.

"YES BITCH! YOUR TWELVE-YEAR-OLD BAD, FAT ASS SON GOT MY DAUGHTER PREGNANT!"

Fredquisha just stood there shocked, immobile, and completely mute. Her eyes couldn't move away from Paulette and Quantayzia. She was attempting her best to process the stream of scandalous information that just blasted her into unreality.

There was just no way in hell she would've thought her oldest son would impregnate his babysitter for so many reasons. First, Quimani was just twelve. What twelve-year-old honestly knew anything about pussy or how to get their little dicks wet? Fredquisha wondered. Then, even if Quimani did have sex with Quantayzia, truth be told it wasn't his fault, it would be the babysitter's fault. She was at least three years older than him and clearly sexually assaulted a minor. Shit, sexually

assaulted her son! Just thinking about the fact that this fast ass predatorial young THOT bitch sicked her pussy onto her son enraged Fredquisha second by second. Her blood boiled like hot lava erupting from a volcanic explosion in Indonesia.

"SO, Bitch, what you got to say about it!?!?" Paulette screamed into Fredquisha's frozen face.

"WAIT! WAIT! WAIT! Wait one mothafuckin' minute! I'm gonna need you to stop callin' my daughter a bitch you bulldog lookin' ass bitch!" Evelyn, Fredquisha's mother, spat as she got up in Paulette's face. She had to intervene and defend her daughter from the wild accusations.

Quimani and Zy'meer, looking like guiltless, innocent chubby boys stood off to the side as a possible ratchet fight almost ensued.

"Evelyn, step the fuck away from me 'cuz you just as responsible as Fredquisha is!" Paulette responded, now ready to possibly beat Evelyn's ass as well.

Paulette, a woman who considered herself a BBW boss bitch, was a well-kept redbone who weighed damn near twice the size as Fredquisha. A tad taller, Paulette had a devil red lace front bob crowning her head. Baby blue contacts covered her pupils. The longest fake eyelashes rested on her eyelids. Everywhere Paulette went she had to show the fuck out in case she met a nigga that was going to elevate her to the next level.

Paulette then turned her attention back to a still silent, motionless Fredquisha. The flabbergasted mother and perhaps potential grandmother was still shocked by the salacious allegation.

"First of all Paulette, we need to make sure she even pregnant by Quimani if that's the mothafuckin' case then, if she out here poppin' her lil fishy pussy on these boys, how I know for sure Quimani got her pregnant. Second of all—"

Suddenly Paulette yanked Quantayzia and jutted her in front of Fredquisha. "Look this bitch in her eyes and tell her what else you told me! TELL HER GOD DAMN IT BEFORE I KNOCK YO ASS OUT!"

"We been havin' sex for two years, Ms. Fredquisha...," Quantayzia admitted in a low, terrified pitch.

"WHAT?!?" Fredquisha, shaking her head, quickly spun on her feet and looked Quimani up and down. "QUIMANI! IS THIS TRUE!?!? BOY, TELL ME THIS IS NOT TRUE!"

Quimani looking terrified more than ever, tremored at the sound of his mother's voice. He lightly shrugged his shoulders without saying a word. He just knew he was in some big ass trouble this time.

The eldest boy was on the verge of turning 13, and while Fredquisha may have previously been in denial about the idea of her oldest son being sexually active, all the seemingly blatant warning

signs were there. He had a cell phone – but the phone wasn't used for emergencies. He used it to text and call his multiple "friends," many of whom were girls around his age. Fredquisha would even let him stay up all damn night talking on the phone with his "friends."

It was crazy too 'cuz Quimani always bragged to his mother about having all types of girlfriends at school. Quimani even one time got caught looking at porn on his cell phone, but he lied and told his mama that it was a mistake. Fredquisha simply ignored all the signs that were there, telling herself that her son was acting much more mature than what his age allowed.

Quimani still couldn't say anything. He just looked around at nothing in particular and kept his hands in his pocket. Fredquisha lunged at the boy, grabbed him by his shirt collar and threw him against the apartment building wall.

"YOU BETTA SAY SOMETHIN' BEFORE I KNOCK YO ASS OUT!" Fredquisha roared.

"Yes, we been hunchin'…," he responded.

"BOY! I'M GON FUCK YO ASS UP!"

"Hey! HEY! Fredquisha, let him go! You hurtin' him!" Evelyn shouted, trying to stop her daughter from hitting the boy on the busy street corner.

"Ma! Stay out of my shit! This my son! I can fuck him up if I want to!"

"GIRL! HE JUST 12!" Evelyn then tried to pull Fredquisha off Quimani, but she didn't relent.

"Ma! Go home! I'm gonna talk to you later while I handle this!"

"Girl…"

"MA!"

Evelyn threw her hands up in the air. "Fine, but you dead ass wrong. You need to talk to him before you attempt to beat him…"

"I GOT IT, MA! BYE!"

As soon as Evelyn walked off towards her car, Paulette, still obviously pissed as shit, lunged up onto Fredquisha. "So, ummm, how we can fix this situation?!?!?" Paulette growled as she observed Fredquisha still pinning her son up against the wall.

"We gon need to talk about it later…"

"TALK ABOUT IT LATER?!? We need to talk about this shit now!"

"Paulette! Please, girl! I'm just as pissed off as you are! I'm sorry! I just don't know what else to tell you! But I need to deal with this bad ass boy now!"

Paulette huffed and smacked her teeth. She turned around, grabbed Quantayzia and led her back to the Altima still running. "Come on, let's get the fuck out of here. And, ummm, bitch, you better make sure you call me so we can handle this situation like ASAP!"

Fredquisha rolled her eyes and shook her head. Once Paulette and Quantayzia got in the Altima, the mother and daughter sped off down the street. Fredquisha turned her attention back to her son and got super-close up into his face. “Get cho dumb ass inside the house, you little black fat mothafucka,” Fredquisha growled at Quimani.

With tears forming in his partly guilty, partly innocent eyes, ready to pour out onto his cheeks, he anticipated what was about to happen next – a horrid ass whooping from his mother.

Fredquisha let go of the boy and then he and Zy’meer entered the apartment building and cautiously marched up the stairs.

Glen, the crackhead maintenance man, just so happened to be in the building today. Earlier he’d received a call from Albertina, one of the elderly neighbors in the building, that her sink was stopped up and that she needed some last minute assistance. Glen usually would’ve never made the run, but Albertina offered him a hot plate of food and a wine cooler if he hopped in his Chevy Malibu and stormed down to the building to unclog her sink. Old chitlins and collard green leftovers can create a monstrosity of a clog apparently.

“Hey, Fredquisha, wassup baby doll, you still got that roach problem?” Glen smiled, revealing a mouth with only three teeth. One front tooth, two bottom canines. The rest were smoked away.

Glen could tell something was off with Fredquisha.

“I ain’t got time for no chit-chat today, Glen. I’ll holla at you later…”

“Aiight, baby doll!” Glen then scanned Quimani and Zy’meer up and down. “Damn, them boys gettin’ fat! Ya’ll betta slow it down before you get sugar! Fuck around and get yo feet cut off!” the crackhead handyman joked.

“Glen, FUCK OFF! I SAID I ain’t time for the bullshit!”

The crackhead screwed his face up and began to walk off, “Well, fuck you too, ole lazy, nasty byeetch,” he grumbled under his malt liquor-smelling breath.

Once the Pierce family (well, not Pierce ‘cuz Quimani nor Zy’meer had Fredquisha’s last name) made it up to the third floor, without hesitation Fredquisha grabbed Quimani by his shirt collar and dragged him down the smoky hallway that reeked of pigs’ feet. Albertina’s cooking of course. The trio made it to their apartment front door. With one hand still gripped around Quimani’s shirt collar, Fredquisha used the other to rummage through her pocket and pulled out her keys. “Zy’meer, open up the goddamn door!” MooMoo threw the keys at Zy’meer. He quickly opened the door and then walked in. Fredquisha pushed Quimani inside the apartment and then slammed the door with her foot. “Zy’meer, lock my mothafuckin’ door and then go to my bedroom while I fuck yo brother up!”

Quimani's tears swelled in abundance. "Mama, no, please, plea—"

All of sudden Fredquisha balled her right fists up and threw a blow to the back of the boy's head, interrupting his plea.

BAM!

"Ahhhhhh!" Quimani screeched grabbing his head. "I-I sorry, mama!" he continued to beseech and cry, hoping his mother wouldn't inflict any extreme violence on him. He definitely knew she was capable of it. He'd observed her fuck Myyah and sometimes Zy'meer up on plenty of occasions.

"SHUT UP! All that cryin' ain't gon save yo ass now! Goin' around here dickin' down all these girls! We gon see just how much dick you got in a minute, lil boy!"

"Mama, please, I 'm sorry!'

"NO, YOU AIN'T SORRY! YOU GOT QUANTAYZIA MOTHAFUCKIN' PREGNANT!!! DO YOU KNOW I CAN GET IN TROUBLE NOW, YOU LITTLE FAT, GREASY BLACK NIGGA?!?!"

Without hesitation, Fredquisha began to throw a barrage of punches at Quimani. Zy'meer watched from a distance, almost beginning to cry seeing his brother reel in pain from the relentless blows.

Fredquisha didn't stop with her punches as she dropped every expletive in the book onto Quimani. At each sound of her malicious words, she threw punch after punch into Quimani's chest, face and stomach.

As he loudly wailed out in excruciating pain and released waterworks of distress, Quimani tried his best to collect his apologetic thoughts along with his rapid, asthmatic breathing. Fredquisha still wasn't stopping her violent abuse though, and with every blow she gave her son, she wanted to inflict him into knowing he possibly fucked up her and his life.

Fredquisha halted her punches and saw Zy'meer still standing there off the side. "ZY'MEER! I THOUGHT I TOLD YOU TO GO TO MY ROOM! IF YOU DON'T GO, I'M GONNA FUCK YOU UP TOO!"

Just like that Zy'meer took off crying and went into his mother's bedroom. The only onlookers now were the six or seven roaches off on an adjacent wall, scared and terrified for the boy. They didn't want to see Fredquisha harm him because Quimani was the one son who kept them well fed.

Fredquisha grabbed Quimani again and looked him dead in his eyes. "GO STRAIGHT TO YOUR ROOM AND TAKE ALL YO CLOTHES OFF! INCLUDING YO UNDERWEAR!" Fredquisha commanded, pointing down the dark hallway of the filthy apartment. With his tears mixed in with his salty beads of sweat swimming down his forehead, Quimani slowly trekked down the hallway and then into his room.

Reluctantly following his mother's instructions, he undressed and threw his clothes off to the side. He then sat on his twin-sized mattress, naked and shivering, anxiously waiting for Fredquisha to barge in at any moment.

Meanwhile back in the living room Fredquisha stormed her kitchen. She quickly rummaged through her fridge, pulled out a half-filled bottle of peach Cîroc, twisted the cap off and then chugged the chilled remnants.

"Ahhh!" She gasped for air once the alcohol went down her esophagus and into her stomach. "GOD DAMN IT! All these god damn roaches! You know what! HIS FAT ISS THE REASON I GOT ALL THESE ROACHES! EATING AND NOT CLEANIN' MY PLACE UP! ALWAYS GOT SNACKS AND SHIT IN HIS MOUTH. FAT ASS!"

Obviously now in a state of delusion, Fredquisha rummaged one of the kitchen drawers to locate a pack of cigarettes. "FUCK!" She forgot just that quick she'd run out of cigs at home, but she did have a new pack in her purse. She dashed out of the kitchen, opened up her purse and pulled out a pack of Newports. She slapped a square in her mouth, lit it up, took a few drags, and then searched the apartment for an extension cord. She had an extra one near her television stand and now she was going to convert it into a makeshift whip to teach her son a lesson about not being able to keep his little dick in his pants.

Once she got the brown extension cord whip secured in her hands, she barged down the hallway and then stormed into the boy's room without knocking.

"So how long ya'll two been fuckin', or as you said, 'hunchin', lil boy?" Fredquisha growled as she took a puff from the cigarette.

Quimani didn't respond though as his shivering intensified. With his hands in his laps trying to cover up his exposed genitalia, he looked at his mother, still speechless.

Fredquisha's hazel brown eyes turned to satanic slits as she took the cigarette out of her mouth and blew a stream of thick smoke towards Quimani's face. "So, you just gon sit there? You not gon say anything? You better say somethin' boy or I'm finna fuck you up even more…," Fredquisha warned as she moved closer to her silent and scared son.

Quimani sat on the bed, staring at his insane mother-abuser, tears still running out the corners of his glassy and reddened eyes. His naked, chubby body shivered and jiggled.

"I'm gon ask you one mo mothafuckin' time. Why is you makin' my life difficult, boy?"

"Muhmuh, p—p-ppppplease don hur me, it gon hurt me, please," Quimani stammered and pleaded.

"Nah, nigga, I'm finna put some pain on you since you messin' wit

my mind and my pockets!" Suddenly without hesitation, Fredquisha took the cigarette in her hand and injected it into the side of Quimani's neck.

"AHHHH!" Quimani shrieked, feeling the cigarette burn into the flesh on his neck.

SLAP! Fredquisha's hand went across Quimani's face. She quickly bundled the extension cord up in her hand, turning it into a makeshift slave whip and began lashing the boy like he was a thief who got caught emptying out her life savings.

"AH! AHHH! NO, MAMA! NO!!" Quimani cried, doing his best to utilize his limbs to protect his body from the sharp and quick lashes.

"SHUT UP! SHUT THAT SHIT UP NOW! MAN THE FUCK UP! SINCE YOU WANNA ACT LIKE A MAN, TAKE THIS FUCKIN' PAIN LIKE A MAN!" Fredquisha kept at it, relentlessly striking the boy with the whip.

Given that Quimani was naked, Fredquisha could see his penis, and she quickly noticed that he was urinating all over the bed and floor. "BOY! YOU PISSIN' ALL OVER MY SHIT NOW!?!? OH HELL NAH!" Seeing her son urinate all over the place gave her the incentive to ramp up her attacks. She temporarily stopped her lashes and then quickly scanned the room, looking for another object she could use to exact more pain onto Quimani. With nothing she could immediately use to torture her son, she threw the whip down on the ground, snatched a pillow off his bed and then pinned Quimani into the bed. She took the pillow and began to smother Quimani, "YOU FUCKIN' KIDS MAKE ME SICK! I WISH I WOULD'VE ABORTED YOU LIL FUCK NIGGAS WHEN I HAD THE CHANCE!" Fredquisha growled.

Quimani, fighting darkness and the lack of oxygen, cried, but his anguished screams were completely muffled by the pillow completely covering his face.

"Mama! NO! Let him go!" Zy'meer suddenly busted through the bedroom door. Although he was younger than Quimani, he was just as big, yet more athletic. He balled his fists up, almost looking he was ready to fight his own mother to protect his brother from possible death.

Fredquisha halted her smothering of her eldest and then turned around scanned Zy'meer up and down! "OH, SO WHAT YOU GON DO?!? BEAT MY ASS?!?"

"MAMA! YOU HURTIN' HIM! PLEASE STOP, OR I'M GONNA CALL THE POLICE!"

"BOY! WHO THE FUCK YOU THINK YOU THREATENING!!?!?"

All of sudden Zy'meer stood his ground as Fredquisha stormed towards him. With the whip still in her hand, she tried to swipe the boy, but he ducked and then went under the lash and wrestled his

mother down to the ground.

“BOY! YOU GON SHOVE ME DOWN!?!? I’MMA KILL THE BOTH OF YOU!”

“NO YOU NOT!’ Zy’meer screamed back as he all of a sudden started delivering blow after blow to his mother’s face and torso.

“AHHHHH!” Fredquisha screamed. She totally didn’t see Zy’meer’s vengeful attack coming, and despite his age, his strength and endurance were overpowering a now tired and lethargic Fredquisha.

The mother, who now found herself on the losing side of the battle, tried her best to muster up the strength to defend herself. But that quickly came to a halt. Because now Quimani, who was no longer afraid of his mother thanks to his brother’s intervention, was going to fuck this bitch up…

Chapter Twenty

Fredquisha somehow managed to escape the unexpected brutality of her two sons, but with the timely intervention of Glen. The crackhead maintenance man somehow or another heard all of the commotion going on from outside the apartment. Before taking off back to his crib on the Westside, he just so happened to be loitering in the alley of the building. He was smoking some of that rock-caine when he heard the screams and yells coming from Fredquisha's apartment.

When Glen stormed into the apartment, he found a naked Quimani and Zy'meer relentlessly kicking and punching Fredquisha to the point where she looked like she was almost on the precipice of passing the fuck out. He stopped the fight, and Ms. Albertina the elderly neighbor, who too heard all the commotion across the hall, called the police.

Within minutes the Jakes showed up…

~

An hour later…

Blue police lights flickering from three Chicago Police Department squad cars illuminated the opaque street corner of 63rd and Halsted. Fredquisha was standing outside, holding ice to the right side of her face, observing her two sons get taken away in the back of one of the police squad cars. A Hispanic-looking officer strolled over to a silently anguished Fredquisha and looked her up and down, partly pitying her.

"So, we're gonna have to go ahead and take the boys to your mother's place. My advice is that they should stay there or with another family friend, maybe even their fathers, for the time being. Unfortunately, because the two boys are minors, we're going to have to report you to DCFS. A case manager will have to conduct a full investigation before your children are allowed to come back to your apartment," the Hispanic officer explained.

Fredquisha lowered her head and damn near busted out crying hearing the potentially deep legal trouble she now found herself in.

This shit was just too much to handle, and the last thing she needed was some social worker bitch all up in her shit. Marco and Gooch, Quimani and Zy'meer's fathers, were gonna be pissed as fuck too once they found out what happened, especially since both men were full-on criminals. The last thing those two niggas wanted was to take on full-fledged fatherly responsibilities whilst they managed their illegal street enterprises.

"Ok…," MooMoo huffed. That was the only response she could produce from her swollen lips.

Suddenly MooMoo gasped. SHIT! Where was Myyah?!?

Fredquisha pulled out her phone from her back pocket and glanced at the time. It was damn near 10 PM and the deranged mother quickly realized that Mrs. Watkins hadn't dropped off Myyah.

Fredquisha gawked at her sons in the squad car, almost wanting to break down and sob in front of the officers along with a few distant onlookers. Regardless of the fight, Quimani and Zy'meer were truly her gems and she couldn't imagine that unexpectedly she would find herself caught up in this dilemma of having them potentially stripped away from her.

"Are you going to be alright, ma'am?" The officer asked Fredquisha.

"Yessir…I'm good. I just need to go check up on my daughter. She over her other grandma's house..."

"Ok, well. Like I said, a social worker from DCFS will be in touch. Are you currently under investigation with them?"

"No…Not that I am aware of…"

"OK, well, I'm sure all of this will get resolved. Have a good night…" The officer stuffed a small white notepad into his uniform shirt pocket and then made his way to the squad car carrying the two brothers. Quimani, in particular, kept gazing at his mother with his eyes turned to venomous slits.

Truth be told, Fredquisha's mother, Evelyn, should not have been the one to take the boys in since she herself was on probation for child endangerment. For years Evelyn operated an illegal daycare out of her shitty apartment living room over in neighboring South Shore. About a year ago, one of her client's toddler was supposedly exposed to rat droppings inside the

grandmother-sitter's obviously messy apartment. The baby boy ended up coming down with a bad case of Hantavirus Pulmonary Syndrome that damn near killed him. Denisha, Evelyn's client, was obviously enraged as fuck and snitched on her to DCFS, which inevitably resulted in her getting arrested and placed on probation for three years. But damn, didn't Denisha know just from a cursory glance of Evelyn's apartment that it was nasty as shit? This is what happens

when you try to have neighbors watch your children for the low.

As soon as the squad car carrying her boys took off, Fredquisha exhaled and shook her head. She then made her way back into the apartment building. Once she got inside and made her way back into her apartment, she plunged her hand through her purse sitting on the kitchen countertop and pulled out her pack of cigs. With one hand still holding ice against her bruised face, she slapped a square in her mouth, lit it up and took a few puffs as she made her way over to her couch. She pulled out her phone, dialed Mrs. Watkins and waited for the woman to answer…

Ring. Ring. Ring. Ring. Ring. Ring.

~

Back in Matteson – The Watkins Residence…

Mrs. Watkins and Jonah were anxiously sitting in the living room watching a rerun of Law & Order. Their nerves were wracked with fire and anxiety. Detective Lennie Briscoe, played by the late and great Jerry Orbach, was grilling some crazy ass white bitch about the disappearance of her six-year-old daughter. Mrs. Watkins shook her head at the sound of all those lies pouring from the white bitch's mouth in regard to the whereabouts of her daughter. Grandma just wondered how anyone could be that crude and malicious to their own blood. Once Detective Briscoe had enough of the lies and proceeded to slap handcuffs onto the white lady, Mrs. Watkins visualized seeing Myyah in a similar predicament. But Grandma was so glad now baby girl was peacefully asleep upstairs. She assured Myyah she didn't have to go back to living in ghetto hell with her crazy ass mama in the city. But despite the assurance, Mrs. Watkins was still burning with fear with the possible legal consequences of taking the girl.

Buzz. Buzz. Buzz.

Mrs. Watkins phone vibrated in her lap. Already anticipating a call from Fredquisha, lo and behold, Mrs. Watkins saw her son's trifling baby mama's name flash across her cell phone screen.

"Fredquisha's calling me," Mrs. Watkins exclaimed as she looked up to Jonah who was sitting on an adjacent couch. Mother and son were now edgy more than ever given they'd just technically kidnapped Myyah. "What should I do? The phone keeps ringing…" Mrs. Watkins quickly as Jonah.

"Just answer it and tell that nasty, abusive slut that Myyah isn't going anywhere until DCFS does an investigation!"

Mrs. Watkins quickly swiped the screen of her phone and put it up to her ear, "Yes, Fredquisha," she answered, pretending like nothing was wrong.

“UMMMM! Mrs. Watkins! Where is Myyah? You were supposed to be back here with Myyah!” Fredquisha barked through the phone.

“Yeah. I know that – that is until she told me you’ve been beating on her and cussing her out. I called DCFS on you and I’m gonna keep her here until the social worker does some sort of investigation on your nasty, despicable ass!”

“BITCH! THAT’S MY DAUGHTER, HOE! YOU CAN’T KEEP HER! FUCK YOU TALKIN’ ‘BOUT, BITCH?”

“We’ll see about that Fredquisha! You ain’t gon put your nasty, section 8 paws on my granddaughter again. And just so you know, I’ve even gone to the police and Myyah gave the police her testimony about your abuse. So good fucking luck with trying to get her back…”

“BITCH! IF YOU DO NOT BRING MY DAUGHTER BACK OVER HERE IN THE NEXT HOUR, HOE I’M FINNA PULL THE FUCK UP!”

“Fredquisha…No. And if you come over here I swear to GOD I will go into my closet and get my husband’s gun and show you how much he taught me!”

“YOU OLD ASS RAGGEDY ASS WANNABE BOUJEE ASS BI—”

Mrs. Watkins heard enough and suddenly hung up the phone. She threw it off to the side and held her arms, slightly trembling.

“What she say, ma?”

“Nothin’ important. She ain’t gon do shit, and if she comes over here, I’m finna blow her brains off her mothafuckin’ head. This bitch got me all out of my Christianity fuckin’ around with her. Jonah, I swear to God I’mma kill that bitch if she comes over here fuckin’ with me and my granddaughter!”

“MA! I don’t know about this anymore. We are getting too deep into this. Fredquisha is that type of crazy woman who might come over here with a squad of her delinquent family members!”

“I don’t give a fuck, Jonah. I’m from the hood too and the bitch is about to see another side of me!”

Buzz. Buzz. Buzz. Mrs. Watkins vibrated again, and she just assumed it was Fredquisha calling her up. “I bet you that’s her ass calling me up!” Mrs. Watkins growled as she grabbed the phone and looked down. To her surprise though it wasn’t Fredquisha, it was actually Cheryl, one of her second cousins who lived all the way out in Oak Park, a westside suburb.

Mrs. Watkins quickly changed her disposition, although she was confused as to why Cheryl was calling her this late at night. Did someone in the family die?

The angered grandmother swiped right and answered, “Hey Cheryl, what’s going on girl? I haven’t heard from you in a while!”

“Chile! I know right, but I got some crazy ass news to tell you!”

“What, what’s wrong? Someone died?”

“Nah, hell no. But you remember Aunty Janice’s half-brother, Glen?”

“Umm, yeah…. I think I met him years ago at the family reunion. That’s the one on crack, right?”

“Hell yeah, he still smokin’ that shit. But baby, so I just ran into his ass at Jewel’s. You know what he just told me?”

“What?” Mrs. Watkins replied with a screwed up face.

“Baby, why Austin’s trifling ass baby mama Fredquisha got into a fight with her two sons. He told me they whooped her ass like a two dollar trick, baby!”

“WAIT!?!? WHAT!?!? I JUST GOT OFF THE PHONE WITH THAT BITCH!?!?”

“Why?”

“It’s a long story, but she been abusing Myyah! I got Myyah over my house as we speak!”

“SHIT! Cousin, let me tell you. The cops came and everything. They had to take her two fat ass sons away. Told me they took them over to their other grandmother’s house. Fredquisha at home right now lookin’ tore the fuck up, you hear me!”

“WAIT! How does Glen even know Fredquisha?!?!”

“Glen does building maintenance work from time to time for Nathaniel. Small world, ain’t it?!?”

“What!?!? Jackie’s ex-husband?!? Shit! So, this just happened not too long ago then? Like a few hours ago?” Mrs. Watkins replied as she slapped her forehead and looked over at nosey ass Jonah.

“Yes, hunny!”

“I’m finna call this bitch back now. This ain’t nothin’ but God’s divine intervention.”

“Aiight, girl! Handle ya business!”

“Aiight, cousin. Thanks for the heads up!”

“Talk to you later…”

“Same here,” Mrs. Watkins replied as she hung up the phone. “This bitch ain’t gettin’ Myyah. We got her ass!”

“What happened?” Jonah inquired.

“WELLLL…. Apparently, them two boys of hers got into a fight with Fredquisha, the cops were called and now it’s lookin’ like she in some hot shit. That bitch called me knowing her ass in some bullshit. I’m finna call her back and tell her I know the full fuckin’ truth now!” Mrs. Watkins was slowly losing her cool, becoming more aggressive, dropping every curse word known to man.

Jonah shook his head and let out a light chuckle.

“Let’s see what her ass got to say now,” Mrs. Watkins grunted as she quickly went through her phone, pulled up Fredquisha’s number in the recent calls list and dialed her right away.

Ring. Ring. Ring. Ring.

~

Fredquisha manically paced her apartment. Three THOTiana roaches, thinking they were chilling in the 3-0-5, were skinny dipping in a cup of orange juice and vodka sitting on the coffee table in the living room. Despite the putrid smell inside the apartment getting worse minute by minute, Fredquisha was unfazed. All she could think about right now was the precarious situation she had going on with her children. Her two boys just less than three hours ago gave her an intense beat down which resulted in her fucked up face and swollen limbs. They were now temporarily staying with her mother until things got sorted out with a caseworker. Then, Mrs. Watkins was holding Myyah hostage, adamant on not returning the girl until she got a social worker investigating her ass. Fredquisha was on the verge of an epic meltdown, but she wasn't going to let any of this deter her from growing her relationship with sexy ass Trel.

"Pop, lock and drop it! Pop, lock and drop it!" Fredquisha's ringtone on her iPhone went off. Huey's one hit wonder "Pop, Lock and Drop It" was MooMoo's jam back in the day and made it her ringtone.

"ARE YOU OUTSIDE WITH MY DAUGHTER!??!?" Fredquisha roared, her loud and thunderous voice scaring away the THOT roaches from the vodka pool.

"I heard about ya little situation with your boys. We'll just see about you getting Myyah back after you get your shit together, you nasty hoe. You are OBVIOUSLY not fit to be anyone's mother."

"BITCH! I SWEAR TO GOD IF YOU DON'T BRING MY DAUGHTER BAC—"

Mrs. Watkins interrupted, "Or you gonna do what? Seems like you gon have a caseworker down your back? You really gonna do something to me? Something to Myyah?"

Fredquisha just stood there in her smoky, somewhat dark apartment not able to come up with a quick response. A part of her knew Mrs. Watkins was right. Her hands were tied. In a day or so a social worker was going to be all up in MooMoo's shit and the last thing she needed to do was make her situation even more complicated.

"So, what you got to say now?" Mrs. Watkins continued…

"FINE! FINE! You want her, you can have her! You and Austin! Didn't want her ass anyways! I should've aborted her mothafuckin' ass!" Fredquisha quipped and hung up the phone.

"AHHHH!" Without hesitation, she threw the phone against the wall and on impact, it exploded into several pieces.

All of sudden she quickly regretted doing so given she didn't have another phone she could use and there was a strong possibility Trel was going to be calling her up tonight. "FUCK!" MooMoo then growled realizing the stupidity of her action.

Time was now at hand and MooMoo had to move quickly to figure out what she was going to do to get her semblance of a normal life together. For the first time in months, she conjured up the spirit and discipline to clean up the apartment. Had to. It was time to work overtime to put on a show for the social worker(s).

Chapter Twenty-One

Later that Monday night…Chicago's tall, garish skyscrapers illuminated the dark expanse of the wide, partly cloudy skies. The full moon glistened. Earlier today was exceptionally hot and dry; no breezy relief coming from Lake Michigan winds.

Nonetheless, to millions of Chi-town natives, today was yet another day to be in celebration of summer. Tens of thousands of people, many tourists, still jam packed Downtown's vast streets, looking to get in as much fun in the heat of the night. Summers in Chicago liberated people from long, dark months of freezing weather, so now was the time to enjoy everything the Windy City had to offer…

"Welcome aboard Red Line run 905. The next stop is Cermak-Chinatown…," the automated announcement on the southbound Red Line train blared loudly on the relatively empty train car.

Katina Lewis, aka, "Tina", looked down at her partly cracked iPhone 6S screen and glanced at the time. Tina, dark brown-skinned, voluptuous, decked out in green scrubs, long microbraids running down her back, yawned and wiped her reddened eyes. A symptom of getting less than six hours of sleep seven nights in a row. 11:45 PM flashed across Katina's smartphone. She was still a good thirty minutes away from getting off the EL at 95th street. From there she needed to then transfer to a bus to take her to 115th street. There, she'd get off the bus and walk a block over to her apartment.

Ms. Lewis had been up since 4 AM. She decided to work overtime this week in order to fatten next week's paycheck. Rent was almost due. Light, cable and gas bills needed to be paid. The kids had afterschool program tuition due at the end of the month.

Deontae, the father of her two children, was barely contributing to the household. Said a nigga couldn't get a decent paying gig 'cuz the economy was rough. The other excuse was that he had a record and no company wanted to hire a felon. His rationalizations for not being able to get a normal 9 to 5 were true to an extent. However, Deontae spent most of his time playing video games, pursuing his "music" career or fucking other hoes behind Tina's back.

Despite Deontae being a somewhat notable drug dealer in the wild hunneds (the Roseland neighborhood that starts past 99th street on the South Side), Deontae like most fuck boys always complained about being short on money. There were just so many times Katina was ready to kick Deontae out. Nonetheless, she hoped one day he'd get his act together, stop trapping, eventually get a real job and do right by her and their eight-year-old son and four-year-old daughter.

The hardworking mother unlocked her phone and was just about to call Deontae to let him know she was actually ending her overtime shift early tonight. Earlier she'd informed him she was gonna get off at 2 AM, but she couldn't push herself to work that long tonight. Just as she was about to hit Deontae's line, she mumbled to herself, "Fuck it." Deontae hadn't sent her a message all day long, didn't even bother to call to check up on her during her lunch break. Quite obvious he didn't really care about her, so why should she care about him?

Tina then locked her phone, threw it in her purse and slowly closed her eyelids so she could get in a quick nap. She wasn't afraid of closing her eyes on the train. If someone tried it with her, she had her mace and box cutter ready to fuck someone up. Besides, no one else was in the train car with her except these two old ass Chinese ladies who were probably going to get off at the 35th street stop in Chinatown. In Chicago, the Red Line went as far south as 95th street on the South Side to as far north to Howard up on the North Side, damn near touching the city limits of Evanston. The city was planning one extending the Redline to 130th street so Altgeld Gardens and Riverdale residents could get access to the train. Hell, if the train had already run that far south, Tina wouldn't need to catch a bus.

Ms. Lewis, 27, had been a registered nurse within the pediatric ICU at Northwestern Hospital now for some five years. Katina first started off working as a CNA right after she graduated from high school. She would've gone straight for her RN, but she ended up getting pregnant with her eight-year-old not too long after she graduated from high school. Giving birth to her son somewhat delayed her college dreams. Nevertheless, some years later, she took a leap a faith and enrolled in Olive-Harvey College, a local community college. There she slowly worked to obtain her associate's in nursing so she could work as a registered nurse.

Tina had a vision eventually become a nurse anesthetist. Although right now she didn't have her bachelor's in nursing, once she saved up some more money, she was going to head back to undergrad to get her bachelor's and eventually her master's degree. She wasn't playing either – she'd already been in contact with nursing program advisors at DePaul University and the University of Illinois-Chicago. She had her sight set on becoming an anesthetist because apparently, they

started off making over $150,000 a year. Tina couldn't imagine what in the world she would do if she started bringing home that type of money. The salary was going to amount to bringing home more than $5,000 a paycheck after taxes. Right now she was barely bringing home $3500 a month. The more Tina thought about making six figures as an anesthetist, the more she realized the things she could have and do…She'd move her and her two kids out of the desolation of Roseland and buy her a big ass palace in some suburban gated community like Orland Park or Matteson. She'd put her two kids in the best private schools. Pay off all her debts. Buy a new car. There was just so much she could do with making that amount of money while working her dream job.

However, with a fuck boy boyfriend who possessed virtually no real life aspirations, Tina was reaching a boiling point of just finally giving Deontae the deuces. She kind of already had a plan formulated in her head of how she planned on leaving Deontae for good. The apartment she had right now with him was leased in her name, and she had three months left on her current lease. She didn't tell Deontae, but she hadn't renewed the lease. She was going to pinch the shit out of her next four paychecks. From there, she was going to move back in with her mother in Auburn Gresham. She'd already talked to a loan officer at the local Chase bank branch about getting a loan for a condo or a townhouse. She was already making enough money to afford something in the ballpark of a good $180,000. Probably couldn't get anything reasonable in the city, but she figured if she found a job out in the 'burbs, she could then afford a townhouse, shit, maybe even a single family home. Chicago's suburbs were definitely cheaper than the city. Once she moved, her next plan of action was to hit Deontae with child support. Maybe then he'd wake the fuck up, realize he took advantage of a good woman and make better life decisions.

Right now, all Tina needed was just one final nail in the coffin to give her validation she was doing the right thing. Almost on the cusp of turning 30, Tina realized she'd rather be lonely than to be frustrated and miserable living with bum dick. Although she kind of had the inkling that a lot of niggas weren't on shit, she just knew it was somebody out there for her who would appreciate her for who she was and what she had to offer.

A good thirty minutes passed… "Red Line Run 905. 95th Street is the next stop." The familiar train announcement penetrated Tina's ears and instantly woke her up from her brief nap. She wiped her eyes, stood up, adjusted herself and made her way over to the exit of the train. Once the train came to a complete stop, she strolled off and made her way to the bus terminal to catch the #34 bus. Minutes later, the bus came, and within fifteen minutes Tina arrived at her stop on

115th street. She got off, and then coolly and cautiously strolled up to the apartment building.

“Hrrrm, whose car is that?” Tina mumbled once she noticed a champagne Honda Accord with Indiana tags parked outside her building.

As long as she’d been living here, she’d never seen the car before. Most of the residents in the building and on the block knew each other. And then over 80 percent of the residents were elderly. Most of them drove older cars like Buicks, Lincolns, etc. There were a few young families in her building, but none of them to Tina’s knowledge has transportation. They were bus and train bound just like her. Perhaps it was a guest of someone in the building, however, she didn’t put too much thought into the car because she was too tired.

She made her way to the front entrance, opened the door with her keys and then made her way upstairs to the fourth floor. Once she’d arrived at her apartment, unit 4E, she opened her front door and walked through the dark living room, and down the hallway towards her bedroom. She didn’t even wanna grab anything to drink or eat anything light before bed. Deep, peaceful, uninterrupted sleep was all she craved right now.

Tina wrapped her hand around her bedroom door and opened it. Before she could even get a foot in the door all sleepiness escaped her thick body. “WHAT THE FUCK! YOU GOT ANOTHER BITCH IN MY HOUSE?!?!?”

Chapter Twenty-Two

"Oh fuck! Deontae, wake the fuck up! She's back!"

Some slim-thick yellow bitch suddenly shrieked and jumped at the thunderous sound of Tina's announcement. The manifestly scared side bitch instantly grabbed the bed's maroon sheets to cover herself, then she punched a sleeping Deontae to wake him the fuck up. Scared silly side hoe scurried herself into the corner of the bed. She had to protect herself knowing damn well she definitely fucked up sleeping with another woman's man. Fear enslaved her as her promiscuous eyes landed on Tina's balled up fists.

"YEAH! BITCH! I AM BACK! WHO THE FUCK ARE YOU?!?!"

"I'm just Deontae's friend! He didn't tell me he had a girlfriend!"

"NAH, BITCH! HE GOT A GIRLFRIEND AND A BABY MAMA! AND YOU FUCKIN' HIM IN MY HOUSE WHILE MY KIDS IS SLEEP!"

Deontae slowly awakened and wiped his eyes. Throwing back a bottle of Henny and smoking two blunts had put him into coma-like sleep. "What's going on?" he mumbled and slightly yawned. But once his eyes were fully opened and gawking at Tina standing at the front of the room he yelled, "Oh shit! What you doin' back early?!?"

"FUCK NIGGA! WHO IS THIS BITCH?!?"

Although Tina wanted to know, she actually didn't want any answers. "YOU KNOW WHAT! FUCK IT!" she screamed as she quickly darted out from the door and went back into the dark living room.

All types of anxiety-riddled commotion went on in the master bedroom. The distant sounds of the frantic side hoe doing her best to put her clothes back on her naked body could be heard all the way from the living room. Tina dashed towards the sole utility closet near the front door and searched for her gun. The angered mother quickly located the pistol inside a black combination-lock box. She hastily yet cautiously checked the chamber and then made her way back to the master bedroom.

Light skinned side hoe dashed out of the master bedroom and attempted to make a run from the precarious domestic situation.

"AHHHH!" She screamed and threw her hands up, trying to make a sudden run back into the bedroom once she saw the barrel of the

gun aimed right at her forehead.

POW! Tina let the blickie off in the apartment, sending a bullet down the hall and into the upper part of the wall. Luckily behind the wall was cement, so the bullet instantly got lodged, not penetrating over into the next apartment.

“I’m gonna kill these motherfuckers! I work fuckin’ seventy hours a week and this fuckin’ nigga gon bring a random ass bitch up into my mothafuckin’ apartment where my kids are sleepin! Nigga gotta die to-fucking-NIGHT!”

Armed and dangerous, all Tina now saw was crimson red and she was ready to murder Deontae and the side hoe. She barged into the room and there Deontae with his gun his hand, aimed right at Tina. This nigga thought Tina was overreacting and wasn’t going to let her suddenly lose control and end his life, nor the side bitch’s.

“Tina put the mothafuckin’ gun. You lost your fuckin’ mind!” Deontae growled. Gun still cocked in his hand, aimed at his children’s mother, this fuck nigga didn’t seem to think anything was wrong with the current situation. Well, he knew she’d be inflamed seeing him laid up with some random pussy, but, it didn’t warrant her seemingly violent reaction.

“Mommy! Daddy! No!” Both Tina and Deontae’s kids were standing near the door, crying and visibly traumatized. Tina, still holding the gun aimed at Deontae, turned around and looked at her frightened and sobbing children.

Now regretful that she put her kids through the traumatic situation, she then turned back around and scanned Deontae up and down. Her hazel eyes turned to hateful slits. She slowly lowered the gun.

“I’m leaving you…You can have this raggedy ass apartment. I’m taking me and my kids to my mama’s place. Don’t call me. Don’t text me. Lose my number. You fuckin’ bum. You’re such a pathetic excuse of a man and the worst father on the planet. Fucking another woman in my house that you don’t even pay rent for while your own innocent children are sleeping. Fucking clown ass nigga.” Tina then turned her attention towards side hoe, “…and for you bitch, you can have the whole nigga. His dick is trash anyways…”

Side hoe, shivering, goggled at Deontae and then at Tina, and then back at Deontae. “Can I go now?” she asked biting her fingernails, fear laced in her question.

“Bitch, you can stay. I’m leaving…”

“Nah! NO! You can’t go!” shirtless Deontae barked at Tina. The only thing he had on was a pair of boxers and some flip-flops. “Kylah, get yo shit and get out my house, bitch. I gotta talk to my girl.”

Suddenly side piece Kylah gathered her belongings and made a

quick dash out of the master bedroom, down the hallway and then stormed out of the apartment. Lucky ass hoe. Hope she learned the lesson not to fuck with another woman's man (although Deontae was worse than New York City street trash).

"Deontae, we ain't got shit to talk about…I'm gone! Kids, go pack up some clothes in your book bags and get all of your stuff. We're leaving your punk ass daddy…"

"Damn! DAMN! Tina, you fuckin' always do this shit to me! You at work all the fuckin' time. We barely have sex. I'm here by myself raising these kids most of the time! What the fuck was I supposed to do?!?!? Keep jackin' my dick?!?" Deontae cried.

Tina ignored Deontae as he just stood there with arms and hand stretched out in confusion. Guess he was hoping Tina would back down from leaving and instantly forgive him. But seeing him snuggled up with some random ass hoe, in HER apartment, in HER bed, everything else in her name, was the last straw. She was done.

Tina rummaged her closet for a travel bag, and then stormed over to her dresser. She threw in as many clothes as she could into the bag because she wasn't determined to come back for a while. Not at least until she had to get the apartment cleaned since she didn't renew the lease.

"COME ON! TALK TO ME, TINA! SHIT" Deontae growled.

"First of all, put your mothafuckin' pistol down."

"Fine!" Deontae threw the gun onto the bed and then got on his knees. "Talk to me, baby! Please! Don't leave me! I swear I won't do it again! I was just horny, and I needed to bust a nut!"

"How you met her?"

"She was just some random ass THOT I met off Tinder. Nobody really important…"

"She knew you had a whole ass 'fiancée'? She knew kids were the apartment?"

"Nah, baby! I swear!" he obviously lied.

"You know I don't believe you, right?"

"Baby! Come on! It's just pussy! It ain't like I love the bitch!"

"Nigga, you got me fucked up. I hope you can get a job quickly 'cuz I ain't paying the rent on this mothafucka. I'm calling up Mr. Miller tomorrow to let him know what went down. Oh, and I didn't renew the lease by the way!"

"FUCKK MAN! YOU HAD THIS SHIT PLANNED!" Deontae snarled. "YO ASS WAS GONNA LEAVE ME ANYWAYS!"

"Yup!" Tina fake smiled as she finished packing her bag. She zipped the bag up and then made dashed across the hall into her children's room. "Ya'll done?"

"Yeah," both her kids said in unison. "Good, let's go. I'm gonna call

us an Uber."

"FINE! Get the fuck out! You'll be back! Don't nobody want yo fat, nappy headed ass anyways! And you can't suck dick!"

Tina continued to ignore enraged fuck boy Deontae. By this point in their dysfunctional relationship, the mother had already grown immune and numb to his emotional abuse. From time to time he had a knack for taunting Tina about her weight, hair, and other physical aspects about her that made her feel highly insecure. But now, none of that mattered. He was dead to her. She just walked on unbothered. "I will be puttin' yo ass on child support too, so I hope you get your shit together…"

"Man, ok…I see how it is, fat ass bitch. I got you. I swear to God you gon regret this shit!"

As Tina and her two kids made their way to the front door of the apartment, she turned on her feet and looked Deontae up and down. "You know, I can't believe I wasted my life thinking you were gonna be someone. You turned out to be worse than the trash sitting outside on the streets right now. The only good thing I got out of you were my two kids. And they don't even really respect your clown ass. So, good luck with life, Deontae…I'm out. And I'm for real about the lease…So unless you can afford to renew it on your own, Mr. Miller is gonna expect your ass out soon."

"But the lease is in your name…You just gon stop paying it?"

"No. I got an emergency rental assistance voucher, but since you aren't on the lease, I'll just go ahead and tell Mr. Miller about our little disagreement tonight. He'll ask you to leave the premises immediately or get your name on the lease. He'll eventually get his coins. But like I said, you're on your own now, childish ass nigga…"

Deontae's eyes turned to vengeful slits. He just shuddered his head up and down. "Ok, then. It's whatever. Don't just be calling me, talkin' about you wanna work on things. Bitch, it's over. Get out!"

"Whatever, nigga. Get a job, fucking bum…" Tina retorted, not even giving him eye contact. As she and her kids trekked downstairs, she pulled out her phone and hailed an Uber. The woman and her two kids walked over to a well-lit street corner and anxiously waited for the arrival of the black Nissan Altima to pick them up and take them to Grandma's house over in Auburn Gresham.

"So, mama, we aren't coming back at all?" Desiree, Tina's daughter asked as she looked up at the still partially angered woman. "Nope. Not at all. We gonna stay with granny for a bit then get our own place far away. Out of the city."

"So, that means we not gonna have to go to the same schools?" Rashad, her son, asked.

"Nope! You're gonna go to a different school too, hopefully!"

“Good, cuz I hated that school anyways…” Rashad replied with a huge smile plastered across his face.

Within five minutes the Uber arrived. The entire family hopped in and sped off into the early morning to Auburn-Gresham. The neighborhood was about a good twenty minutes west of Roseland.

Chapter Twenty-Three

Beep. Beep. Beep. Beep…

Inside the Cook County Jail medical ward, room 450, Austin lay in deep sleep after a given an intense round of a morphine IV drip. The beeping sound of an EKG machine resonated throughout the entire room. Austin was caught up in an apparent mix-up. First responding corrections officers who were on the scene in the library shot Austin thinking he was the perpetrator responsible for the death of Terrence and the unknown corrupt corrections officer. Three rounds of non-lethal rat shots were blasted at Austin's legs and torso, instantly knocking him down to the ground.

After a quick internal investigation, it was discovered that without a doubt that the gang-affiliated jail guard was a crooked corrections officer. Austin was clearly cleared of any wrongdoing, but unfortunately for him, he was shot twice in his legs and one bullet was sent to his stomach. One of the bullets slightly lacerated a section of his colon, hence he needed emergency surgery to prevent major blood loss.

As the morphine began to fade away Austin slowly awakened and opened his eyes…His pupils then latched onto a short, brown-skinned young nurse with a short buzz cut.

"Hey there, looks like you had a rough afternoon a day ago?" The nurse asked with a big smile running across her face. The dimples in her cheeks were a bit flattering to Austin.

Austin reached over and wiped crust out of his eyes with his right hand. Because he was a low-security risk, officers didn't bother to put cuffs his wrists to the railing on the hospital bed.

"Yeah, damn…What happened?" Austin responded to the nurse tending to his IV bag. Being sedated, he somewhat forgot how he even ended up in the jail's hospital ward.

"Unfortunately, you were shot…That Sunday afternoon when you were in the library, one of those jail guards tried to kill another inmate and you intervened…You don't remember?" The nurse smilingly asked.

Austin thought about for a second. "Damn, I do now…" He then rubbed the side of his lower torso. "Ahhh," he moaned out in pain. "Damn, they really shot me though?"

"Yup…But they used small rounds so the wounds wouldn't be lethal. You're gonna be alright though. At least you won't have to spend the rest of your time in the cell. Lucky for you since you get out

in a few weeks, you got cleared to stay here until your release. You might need some physical therapy."

"Yeah…Shit, I do…I do get out," Austin said, still somewhat high from the morphine drip still obviously running through his veins. "What's your name?" he asked the nurse.

"Latonya…But you can call me Tonya."

"I'm Austin…"

"I know! Mr. Watkins…" she smiled. "Anyways, I'm gonna go check up on your pain meds and see what we're gonna be feeding you for breakfast. Make yourself comfortable. At 11, the doctor is gonna come check up on you and see how your wounds are healing."

"Ok," Austin responded as he made himself comfortable in the hospital bed.

With nothing on but a green gown, he glanced over at an open window and could see the entire Chicago cityscape glowing among the backdrop of partly cloudy blue skies and morning sunshine. Although he could clearly see he was still confined in a jail as barb wired fences surrounded the entire jail complex, just the idea of being free in a few weeks was exhilarating despite Sunday's 'misunderstanding.' Austin wondered if his mother and other family members were aware of what happened to him, and he didn't get a chance to ask the nurse either. He just sat back, closed his eyes, and continued to enjoy the remaining opioid joy swimming in his blood.

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Ring. Ring. Ring.

Mrs. Watkins jumped at the sound of her cell phone buzzing. It had been day once since she was in 'temporary' custody of Myyah. Grandma just knew at any moment a barrage of harassing phone calls were going come at her left and right from Fredquisha and her family.

Although Myyah was scheduled to be back in school to finish out this school year, Mrs. Watkins refused to drive the girl back to her school in the city. She knew if she'd done that Fredquisha would be there, ready at the school to pick the girl up and bring her back home. But then again, now that she heard from her cousin that Fredquisha was caught up in a jam with social services and the police over her fight with her boys, Mrs. Watkins assumed Fredquisha wouldn't be that brazen to fight her over Myyah. Fredquisha possibly wouldn't make her current, unsolved legal situation worse, Mrs. Watkins presumed.

9:31 AM bleeped on the kitchen stove. Mrs. Watkins was at her dining room table sipping on her black coffee and reading CNN on her phone when it began to ring. She saw an unknown 773 number,

which meant the call was coming from within Chicago's city limits.

"Hello?" Mrs. Watkins answered the phone. Unbeknownst to her, Myyah was slowly making her way downstairs and into the dining room to be with her granny.

"Hey, Mrs. Watkins. This is Officer Washington down at the Cook County Jail."

"Oh, hey!"

"Good morning, ma'am. I'm giving you a call because Austin was wounded in an altercation on Sunday afternoon. He's currently in the hospital recuperating from minor surgery."

"WHAT!?!? Why didn't you all call me or anything!?!?"

"Sorry, ma'am. We would've called you earlier, but we had to conduct a thorough investigation first before we notified you. But like I said, his condition is stable and you can visit him at the jail's hospital if you would like…"

"Ok! Well, I'm coming down right now!"

"No worries. See you soon," the officer responded and then hung up the phone.

"Granny, is there something wrong with daddy?" Myyah asked, standing there appearing solemn as she held onto a brown teddy bear. All that time Mrs. Watkins didn't know baby girl was standing there listening in on the brief conversation from a corner.

Suddenly Mrs. Watkins turned her attention towards her granddaughter. "No, baby girl. He's alright! He's just a bit sick. I'm going to go visit him while you stay here with Uncle Jonah, ok?"

"Ok…"

"Let's make you some breakfast before I go, ok? I'm gonna also talk to your daddy about letting you stay here with us forever…"

"So, I won't have to go back and live with Fredquisha then?"

"I'm hoping so, baby girl...I'm hoping so.

As soon as Mrs. Watkins got Myyah situated with breakfast, she dashed upstairs to go tell Jonah what happened to Austin and that she needed him to babysit Myyah for the morning. Already taking her morning shower, she put on some jeans, tennis shoes and a light jacket, called for an Uber and made her way into the city.

~

"Watkins! Your mother is here to visit you!" A jail guard knocked on Austin's hospital door, instantly catching his attention as he read a course catalog to one of the colleges he was interested in attending once he got out of jail. Earlier, one of the supervising guards that monitored his cell floor grabbed a few of his course catalogs and other belongings so he could have something to read while he spent the

remaining time of his sentence in the jail hospital.

Austin wasn't expecting his mother to come and visit him. He put the course catalog down on the nightstand next to him and then went to adjust the bed with a remote control in his hand.

Mrs. Watkins walked into the room and immediately cried, "Oh My God! My baby! What did they do to you!?!?"

"It's alright, mama, it was just a mishap!" Austin explained with a scrunched up face. He was in some slight pain. "I just took a few bullets to my legs and stomach…"

"JUST A FEW!?!? This is crazy! Just two days ago you were dancing with Myyah and now you're laid in a bed because of a mishap!?!?" she screeched as she made her way closer to the bed and began to rub Austin's face.

"Mama, how did you even find out? Don't cry. I'm gonna be alright!" Austin beamed as he reached in to hug his mother.

"I just got the call not too long ago about what happened! Oh my God! I cannot believe this!" Mrs. Watkins continued to sob.

"Mama, I'm fine. Just relax. Grab a chair and relax. I'm gonna be fine. I just had a little minor surgery. That's all…"

Mrs. Watkins pulled a chair up to Austin's bed. She rummaged her purse for a piece of tissue and wiped tears from her cheeks. "Ok, well at least you are fine. I cannot wait until you get out of this hellhole, Austin. I just cannot wait. It's so much going on with you and Myyah."

"I know. But I only got a few weeks left. They lettin' me stay here until I get released. I guess it's their way of apologizing. At least I ain't got no handcuffs on me," Austin laughed and raised his free hands.

"I guess…" Mrs. Watkins laughed back and rubbed Austin's hand.

"Ohhh, Austin," Mrs. Watkins exhaled and shook her head. "I don't even know if this the right place to even tell you what I need to tell you…"

"What is it?"

"Well, I didn't wanna ruin the night you and Myyah had, especially considering ya'll almost never got the chance to see each other, but Fredquisha…That bitch right there…She ain't right, Austin. She ain't right. That bitch is foul and got your daughter living in some decrepit ass conditions in that apartment."

Austin lowered his head and shook it. He wasn't shocked though; he'd always known Fredquisha didn't know what the definition of cleanliness meant.

"And Myyah told me the other day that Fredquisha had been physically and emotionally abusive to her…"

"What?!?" Austin replied with anger suddenly carved into the features of his dark-brown face.

"Yes…Austin, I always knew she was doing something to that girl,

but I couldn't quite put my finger on it. Myyah finally confessed and said that bitch had been hitting and calling her all types of names."

"Mama, please…I can't. I can—"

"Shhhhh. Austin, I know," Mrs. Watkins interrupted. "I got everything under control. I called DCFS and I took Myyah down to the police to file a police report against her. She's staying with me no until everything gets squared away…"

"Wait, what? You went to a judge and got custody?"

Mrs. Watkins quickly looked around and noticed the corrections officer was closely monitoring their conversation from a distance. She leaned in and whispered, "No. I ain't bringing her back to Fredquisha's place until everything gets squared away. To hell with the law. I do not want my granddaughter to be around that wench anymore."

"But mama—"

"Austin, just trust me on this. I got it under control. Fredquisha is going down soon. Just don't worry, ok?" Mrs. Watkins interrupted again.

Austin leaned back in the hospital bed. He closed his eyes and placed his hand over his forehead, slowly shaking it in disbelief.

"Mama, I hope you know what you're doing. Please don't let my daughter get taken away. Fredquisha is a vindictive ass woman. She'll do anything to make sure Myyah stays with her."

"I know, son. I know. But you gotta just have faith and hold out and believe everything is gonna be alright. Can you do that?"

Austin took a deep breath and then exhaled. "I guess."

"Good then…Just relax and get better, ok? Myyah needs you. I need you."

"I know. I'm gonna get better and get out of here ASAP. Just please, don't do anything crazy, ok?"

"Of course…"

"Ma'am, visitation is up," the medium-build white corrections officer standing guard announced.

Mrs. Watkins grabbed Austin's hand and squeezed it. She stood up, leaned over and kissed Austin on his forehead. "I love you, Austin. Myyah loves you too."

"I love you too, mama. Tell Myyah I said I love her and miss her."

"Oh, I will. She misses you too…"

Chapter Twenty-Four

Tuesday afternoon rolled in pretty quickly for Fredquisha as she manically paced her trashy apartment living room. Anxiety laced her muscles. Fear dug in her bones. With a fresh Marlboro square tucked into her plump purple lips, she took long, deep puffs. She would've had a big ass blunt in her mouth, but she'd already smoked her stash and needed to hit up Deontae to re-up.

Visibly angered MooMoo blew smoke from her nostrils and grunted as she kept seeing roaches scurry across the living room floor.

"FUCK! All these goddamn roaches! Fuck this shit! I need to call Mr. Nate to fix this shit immediately!" MooMoo loudly grumbled under breath.

Quimani and Zy'meer was still over at their Grandmother Evelyn's house. Fretful as fuck, Fredquisha was expecting at any moment now a social worker from DCFS or Chicago Housing Authority to show up unannounced. That was at least the stern warning her mother gave her. A typical protocol for social services agencies when child endangerment was a possibility. Shit, truth be told, Evelyn had social services called on her several times decades ago when she was raising her own children, so she already knew what to expect. Evelyn even told Fredquisha she needed to do her best to tidy up the apartment, that way she wouldn't give the social worker any more ammunition to make a case for getting her children taken away from her.

Following her mother's instructions, she attempted as quickly as she could in the best of her abilities to tidy up the apartment. She paced the apartment living room with a black plastic trash bag in her hand, doing her best to stuff it with leftover chicken wing cartons from Harold's Fried Chicken, Pizza Hut and Domino's pizza boxes, empty Corona beer bottles, candy wrappers and other discarded trash. The trash was one thing. Shit was easy to pick up now that Fredquisha had the slight energy and motivation to do so. However, what kept bothering MooMoo more and more was seeing the overabundance of roaches of all sizes slowly take over the apartment.

By this point, the brown-blackish critters were everywhere. Up and down the walls. Crawling on the couches. Scuttling on the living room

coffee table. Swarming across the baseboards. Up until now, she was immune to the growing vermin problem, but now that she possibly had social services on her back, she had to do something about the roach issue immediately.

Amidst the backdrop of having to deal with cleaning up the apartment whilst worrying about her boys, another concern for Fredquisha was Myyah. Fredquisha honestly at this point was just willing to give her up and just let Mrs. Watkins take care of her. She didn't even love the girl enough to really care anymore. Sad, but at least slowly she was becoming more and more honest with herself and was willing to put baby girl in better hands.

Hell, there were so many times Fredquisha had thought about letting Mrs. Watkins take permanent custody over her. But of course, the one thing Fredquisha couldn't do was possibly sacrifice the thousands of dollars a month she was receiving to take care of the poor girl. Close to $2500 was at stake and that was enough money for Fredquisha to get her hair did, nails did, buy two to three outfits a week, go on occasional vacations with her besties, even enough money to splurge on drugs and alcohol. It was also enough money for her to go all the way out for her sons. She'd use Myyah's money to buy the boys new clothes, video game systems, and other gifts. But now, with a new baby possibly in her stomach from some random nigga, she could always exploit the newborn to re-up her SSI cash stash.

Buzz. Buzz. Buzz. Fredquisha's phone vibrated in her back pocket. She threw the trash bag down and grabbed the phone out of her pocket. She gawked down and saw that Myyah's school was calling her. "FUCK! She grunted. She needed to come up with an immediate excuse for Myyah's absence.

Fredquisha answered, "Hello?"

"Hey, Ms. Pierce. This is Cassandra down at Daley Elementary. Myyah was absent today and we didn't get a call notifying us. Is she sick or something?"

"Yeah, she been out sick. She got a really bad flu…"

"Ohhhh, I'm so sorry to hear that! OK, well, I hope she gets better. You know this week is the PARCC tests, so there is a possibility she would have to make it up so she can move on to the next grade," the school secretary explained.

"Yeah, ok. She'll be back soon. She ain't gon miss them tests," Fredquisha fibbed.

"Okey-dokey…Take care!" the secretary exclaimed.

"Bye," Fredquisha replied and immediately hung up the phone.

"FUCK!" Fredquisha growled and then threw the phone on the couch. She pulled out her pack of cigs from her left pocket.

Immediately taking one out and throwing a fresh square in her mouth, she once again paced the living room, more manic than ever. What in the hell was she going to do now?!? Fuck it, she thought. Myyah needed to bring her ass back, and if Mrs. Watkins was going to put up a fight, she was going to call the police and let them know Mrs. Watkins kidnapped her daughter.

She dashed towards the couch, picked up her phone, unlocked and immediately scrolled through her contacts to find Mrs. Watkins' number.

BOOM! BOOM! BOOM!

"Fuck, fuck, fuck!" Fredquisha was immediately caught off guard by the three loud knocks on her front door. That had to be the social worker. She just knew it.

"Coming!" MooMoo replied towards the knocks as she frantically scanned the living room. There was still so much to clean up. And it seemed as if with the loud knocks on the door, more roaches came out of nowhere looking to greet the unknown guest.

Fredquisha picked the plastic bag up and attempted to quickly fill it with more trash.

BOOM! BOOM! BOOM! "FREDQUISHA! OPEN UP, GIRL! THIS NATE!"

Fredquisha suddenly dropped the bag in her hand and felt sudden relief overcome her. She lunged towards the door and opened it up. She produced a fake smile at Mr. Garrison. "Hey, Mr. Nate. How are you doing? I didn't know you were back in town?"

The landlord, Mr. Garrison, was a somewhat tall yet plump chocolate man with a partly dry, partly greasy gray jheri curl. A black-and-mild was tucked behind his ear. A visibly old beige Kangol hat covered his head, matching his off-brand JC Penny's white polo, Dockers shorts, and beige open-toe sandals. This was the man's typical uniform as he never spent his winters in Chicago; always in the Dominican Republic or at times Panama. In fact, by the dark circles under his eyes and the smell of rum coming from pores, Fredquisha assumed he probably just came back from the Islands not too long ago.

Nate barged right into the living room of the apartment without even bothering to ask if he could come in. His shady eyes slowly skimmed the still dirty apartment. With his hands on his waist, he grumbled and shook his head, "Girl, what you got goin' on over here?!? I get a call from Glen tellin' me you had the police and shit over my damn building 'cuz you and them boys was fightin'!"

"I know, I'm sorry, Mr. Nate. It was just too much going on Sunday and my boys kinda got carried away. They stayin' with their grandma now while I get my apartment cleaned up. Sorry about the mess, you

know it's hard raising three kids by myself and shit."

"Lady, you got my shit looking like West Side after the MLK riots. You got me fucked up. I mean, ALL the way fucked up if you think I can let you continue living in here like this. And wassup with all of these goddamn roaches and shit!?!?"

Fredquisha couldn't respond. She didn't have a solid reply to give her landlord. Technically it was his fault though that the roaches were taking over. She'd told Glen on so many occasions about the problem, but they simply refused to call an exterminator to get to the root of the issue.

"Mr. Nate, I told Glen. I mean, he came and laid down traps and shit, but they ain't doin' nothin'!"

"Yeah, they ain't doin' nothin' 'cuz you's a nasty ass…you know what…I'm gon' have to give you a thirty-day notice. I'm gonna have to tell Section 8 about this shit 'cuz you ain't gon mess with my money. Got me ALL the way fucked up."

"No, please, Mr. Nate. Don't do that. I already got them possibly on my back and shit. Please, look. I'll do whatever it takes to get the apartment cleaned up. Shit, I think a social worker might be on their way today!"

"Oh really? What the hell you done did? Glen told me that lil fat older son of yours was naked whompin' yo ass!"

"Mr. Nate, please, I need your help. Don't kick me out. I know I ain't been the best tenant and what not. But if you call section 8, they might take away my voucher. I can't afford no regular ass apartment."

"Hrrrm…" Mr. Nate paused for a moment as he continued to scan the abject grime cluttering the entire apartment. He then slightly turned on his feet, gawked at Fredquisha up and down, and placed his hand on her shoulder. He produced a seductive smile and licked his lips. "I can help you out if you help me out…"

Fredquisha slightly jumped at Nate's seductive touch on her shoulder. She scrunched her face up in minor disgust and surprise. "Whatchu mean help you out?"

"Come on now. Let's not pretend you don't know what I'm talkin' about…And we ain't gotta do it here. We can always get a room down at a Motel on 79th."

All of suddenly Fredquisha slapped Mr. Garrison's hand off her shoulder and balled up her fists. "NIGGA! FUCK THAT! YOU GOT ME FUCKED UP. YOU THINK I'M FINNA FUCK YOU TO STAY IN MY APARTMENT?!?!?"

Mr. Nate snickered and began to walk away back to the front door. "Bitch, I'm callin' Section 8 in the morning. I'mma serve yo nasty ass a 30-day notice tomorrow. I suggest you start lookin' for other places, you ole nasty bad-bodied yella bitch…"

“NIGGA! GET THE FUCK OUT MY PLACE, YOU ‘OLE NASTY MOTHAFUCKA! FUCK YOU TALM’BOUT!”

Nate chuckled once again with his hand on the door. “St. Sabina built a brand new beautiful homeless shelter on 87th. Got some new beds in there.”

“FUCK YOU!”

Mr. Nate opened the door and coolly strolled out of the apartment without even bothering to close the door behind him.

Fredquisha lunged at the door and slammed it shut. “NIGGA GOT ME FUCKED UP!”

With her anxiety now higher than the Sears Tower, Fredquisha didn’t know what the fuck she was going to do now. The afternoon was still fresh and there was a real possibility the social worker was going to show up at any minute. She couldn’t go over her mother’s place given she knew her sons still were probably going to be hostile towards her. “Fuck this shit, fuck it!” she said to herself as she dashed towards her coffee table. She grabbed her purse, phone, and keys and then dashed towards the front door. The jig was up. Rather than stay at home, she was just going to have to hide out somewhere and avoid the social worker if she was going to show up today. She needed to hit up one of her besties and chill out, possibly even puff on a blunt to simmer her nerves.

Chapter Twenty-Five

Fredquisha dashed out of her front door. She speedily scampered down the hallway towards the staircase and saw Mr. Garrison making his way downstairs. Although just moments ago she cursed the shady, perverted man and refused his offer of "assistance" in exchange for some pussy (maybe even head), she was now having second thoughts. She hoped his 'offer' still stood. Deep down in her mind and core, she knew she needed to fix her situation as soon as possible and Mr. Garrison seemed to be the timely solution she needed to save face.

The fear and anxiety of suddenly having her whole entire living situation and lifestyle disrupted now compelled her to rethink Mr. Garrison's offer. Fuck trying to hide out at a bestie's crib for the time being. That was just delaying the inevitable. A social worker was going to show up regardless if Fredquisha tried to hide. And if DCFS wanted to, Evelyn warned Fredquisha that they could get a court order and enter the premises with the police at their side. Not to mention, now with Mrs. Watkins also breathing down her back, holding Myyah hostage for the time being, a bitch needed to make some strategic decisions to ensure her future.

"Wait! Mr. Garrison! Look, wait a minute. Let's talk about this," Fredquisha gasped as she tried to run up and catch up to Mr. Garrison.

The shady landlord looked up and gawked at Fredquisha. "Oh, so you changed your mind, huh?"

Fredquisha didn't say a word. She just tightened her lips and went silent, looking like an innocent little girl. She lightly nodded yes.

Mr. Garrison grinned back, "Come on then, let's go. I got some weed and Hennessy too..."

~

Creak. Creak…Crea-ka-ka-creaka-creek-creek...That was the rapid knocking sound produced by the headboard of the raggedy motel Fredquisha and Mr. Garrison were now fucking in.

After agreeing to give up some of her juicy crotch in exchange to get her apartment up to code, Mr. Garrison took MooMoo to the White

Horse Motel on 79th and Stony Island Avenue. The White Horse was some throwback 1960's two-story motel that was notorious for being the hoe stroll in this neck of the woods.

Mr. Garrison wasn't alone in procuring him some pussy for the night. Most of the rooms in the motel were occupied with Johns pining for the best ghetto ratchet nigga pussy the South Side of Chicago had to offer.

The motel room was dark and humid. Mr. Garrison was on top of MooMoo, digging her guts out with his old, hardened shaft (thanks to two Viagra pills). By the way the headboard was knocking up against the wall, it was quite obvious he found his spot. You know that nice, juicy nook inside the puss. Fredquisha's pussy was gooey and tight enough to make Nate amp up his strokes. Each knock the raggedy ass motel's king-sized bed's headboard produced was rhythmic evidence as to just how good the puss was to Mr. Garrison. As for disturbing the neighbors, shit, they were probably getting it in too. No one should've been frightened by the combined sounds of Mr. Garrison's shrieks and the knocks of the headboard. I know my next door neighbor John, the middle-aged white father from Utah, is frightened right now.

"Turn around! Lemme hit it up from the back!" Mr. Garrison growled as he paused in MooMoo's twat.

"Ok…" MooMoo agreed as she got up and then turned on her knees, instantly tooting her jiggly, tatted yellow ass up in the air. Despite being completely turned off by the man, Fredquisha had her cheeks spread wide open so Mr. Garrison could get a clear glimpse of her creamy, lightly shaven pussy.

Fredquisha hoped Mr. Garrison was almost done. She just wanted whatever money and assistance he was going to offer her so she could head back home and get her shit together. Despite Mr. Garrison appearing as if he could handle her juicy ass pussy she was throwing on him, she hoped it wasn't heart attack-inducing.

Old nigga Nate bent over, sniffed her booty hole and then stuck his tongue deep in it. After a few seconds of eating her groceries, he pulled his mouth back and smelled his upper lip. Then he hawked up some spit in his palm and lathered up his dick that was surrounded by a mound of gray pubic hair.

"Ahhhhhhh, shit!" Mr. Garrison moaned, sounding like an elephant dying from thirst. Nigga had no condom on. Nate was old school; condoms were for punks. Besides, Nate figured Fredquisha was healthy given her thickness.

Fredquisha quickly looked over to the right and notice 4:56 PM blipping on the cheap off-brand alarm clock sitting on the nightstand. Nate upped his strokes from the back, and at every pound his torso made against her body, Fredquisha could feel the splash of sweat

beads land on her back and ass.

Mr. Garrison sped up his strokes up even more. He threw MooMoo down, instantly collapsing her onto her stomach. His sweaty and heavy body was now completely covering her as he pumped his old dick fervently in between her legs. The creaking of the bed intensified, a sign that the landlord was probably a good fifty-one seconds away from busting a nut. “Ahhh, ahhh,” Nate wailed as his breathing got even more hot and rapid. Gusts of his cognac-infused breath ventilated MooMoo’s neck and parts of her face. “Ahh, ughh, ohhgh, ughhh!” Nate continued to grunt out loud.

“Come on, baby, fuck this pussy! Cum inside me!” Fredquisha fake moaned and squeezed them twat muscles even harder so this man can hurry the fuck up and get up off her.

You know, truth was, to MooMoo, if Mr. Perkins was about a good thirty years younger, she actually would’ve been more passionate about this fuck session. Just looking at his features, MooMoo could tell maybe in his day Mr. Garrison was probably a looker. Old nigga reminded her of an older version of a nigga she used to fuck with back in the day. If she was some old bitch looking to get her dry, ancient pussy fucked, Mr. Garrison would definitely get it. Despite the weird situation, the truth was Mr. Garrison’s dick wasn’t all that bad, to be honest with you. Pretty decent size. Like a good eight and a half inches, especially since that Viagra pill and three Henny’s on ice is running a race in his veins. But this situation was just business; nothing more, nothing less.

As Mr. Garrison continued to pump in and out of MooMoo, his dick swelled up and got even harder. Oh yeah, bitch, that big pussy was definitely cooking up some gumbo tonight! Pussy juice was creamy and thick like roux too. Mr. Garrison’s eyes turned to squints, beads of his sweat dripped down his forehead and onto MooMoo’s back. The headboard pounds against the flowery wallpaper-covered wall harder and faster…

“Ahhh! AHHHH! AHHHH! I’m cumming! AHHH! AHHHHHHH!”

Ladies and gentlemen, mission accomplished! Mr. Garrison came [no pun intended] to save the day. Power of that P. Despite having some loose pussy walls, MooMoo’s coochie muscles were flexin’ like she was at a bodybuilding competition, destined to come in first place.

“Gahddamn! SHIYYAT!” Mr. Garrison shouted as he slowly pulled out of MooMoo’s ass and rolled over to the bed.

MooMoo didn’t hesitate. She needed to secure the bag quickly. “Ok, so how you gon help me…”

As Mr. Garrison tried to collect his breath, he rubbed his chest. “You use CashApp?” he asked.

“Hell yeah…”

“Good, I’m finna send you $500. And I’m gon have Glen call up this ole Mexican bitch named Maria. She got a cleanin’ service out West. I’mma have her and her brothers come by tonight to help you clean that place up. I can probably get them to deal with the roach problem too. You know them damn Mexican can fix everythang...” Nate then leaned over, picked up his pants and pulled out his cell phone. “What’s yo CashApp thang?”

“$BossLadyQuisha”

A bitch finally secured the gold. Not some medal around her neck though. But the help she needed to stop social services from fucking with her shit. Her iPhone 8+ buzzed. That was probably the alert telling her Mr. Garrison sent her the loot.

Fredquisha grabbed her phone off the nightstand and checked to see if she got the money. Yasss, she thought to herself. As she slowly tried to climb her naked, sweaty body out of the bed, Mr. Garrison turned over and grabbed her. “Where the hell you think you goin’?”

“I gotta get the place cleaned…The fuck???”

“Bitch, you think you gave me $500 worth of pussy?”

“Whatchu mean?!?”

“What I mean is, I ain’t done yet. You ain’t done either. You ain’t gon be done until I say I’m done,” Nate growled.

Fredquisha lowered her head. She rolled back into the bed and spread her legs, assuming Nate was gonna either stick his dick right back into her or eat her out.

“Nah, you gon come suck on these balls…” Mr. Garrison then smiled, “And then you gon eat my ass!”

“Hell nah! I don’t eat no ass! NIGGA WHAT?!??!”

“You want me to take that $500 back? I’ll call up the bank and dispute that shit…”

Fredquisha closed her eyes. “Fine…”

“Yeah, see, that’s what I thought…Don’t act like you ain’t ate no ass before…Over there actin’ like you got standards and shit. Bitch, you live with roaches.”

Chapter Twenty-Six

Tuesday Evening...

"Baby, I told you that Deontae was always a no good nigga. But hey, my mama always told me a bought lesson is better than a taught lesson. I'm just so glad you makin' strides to get the hell up out of that apartment and do better for you and my grandchildren."

Mattie, Katina's mother, was casually chastising her daughter in her kitchen as she prepared dinner for her and her grandchildren this Tuesday evening. Spaghetti and meatballs, garden salad, garlic sticks were on the menu. Chocolate ice cream and cake were for dessert.

The two kids were quietly sitting at the dining room inside of Grandma Mattie's bungalow doing their homework. Katina was gathering her belongings in preparation for her long, twelve-hour shift tonight at the hospital.

"I know. I should've been listened to you, but I'm over him now. I'm just over men, period. I'm just gonna do me and worry about my kids for now," Katina replied to her mother's statement as she finished packing her book bag.

"Well, don't give up on men. Shit, you still gonna need a man eventually in your life, if you know what I mean," Mattie turned and smiled at Katina.

Katina knew exactly what her mother meant too by the smirk she had all over her dark brown chubby face. Shit, a vibrator can only do so much for you. Every woman eventually wants to find the right man to be with for the rest of their life. And every woman knows ain't nothing like riding good dick from a good, sexy man who had his shit together. But it seemed like that wasn't the definition of her relationship with Deontae. She didn't even know if that luck would come her way in the near future.

For now though, although she hoped eventually she'd find someone to get with in the near future and start a family, she just wanted to concentrate on her career and her kids. If the right man came her way, she'd give it thought. But being boo'd up wasn't a priority for her anymore.

After Katina finished packing her lunch bag, she made her way over to the dining room table and kissed her two kids on their foreheads. "Ya'll be good with grandma now. I don't wanna hear about no mess when I get back. Remember, this is her house, ok?"

"Girl…My grandchildren ain't gon bother me…Don't get yourself so worked up. You better head out before you're late for your shift."

"Hah, you're funny. Trust me, you don't know my kids like I do.

They'll tear your house up!"

"Girl, I KNOW my grandchildren…Right, babies…"

"Yes, granny," both grandkids responded and laughed.

"Anyways, mama. I'll see you tomorrow in the AM. Let me head out before I miss my bus…"

"Girl, take my car. Don't be taking no damn bus and train."

"Mama, nah. I can't do that. Besides, what if ya'll have an emergency. I'm good. If I need to get home quickly, I'll just hail for an Uber or a Lyft."

"Alrighty…If you say so. Go on then so you won't be late!"

Katina smiled and walked over to her mother and gave her a tight hug. "I appreciate it, mama. You're a life saver."

"That's why I'm here…"

Katina quickly made her way out of the dining room and then outside to catch a bus. Despite it being around 7 PM, the sun was still in its full orange splendor, shining its tangerine radiance down onto the city. She hurriedly paced herself down the cracked sidewalk on Ada Street until she got to 83rd. There she waited for a bus to take her to the train station on 79th street.

~

"Yeah, girl. I just got up and left his ass after I caught his nasty ass in a bed with another bitch. Can you believe that shit? I mean, it's one thing to be fucking another bitch, but it's another to be fucking a bitch in my house while my kids are in their room sleep. Just straight disrespectful…"

Katina was chirping away on her cell phone as she got off the Downtown bus. Not distracted by the light street traffic, she sauntered towards the vast, covered non-emergency entrance of Northwestern Children's Hospital.

By now it was already nearly 9 PM, and the sun no longer glistened the city's skyscrapers. Street lights were the only luminosity present. The moon was covered in a sea of gray clouds. Tonight, the weatherman on Channel 7 said there was going to be some light showers, so the moon nor stars would be visible.

As nonchalant Katina made her way closer and closer to the entrance suddenly she felt someone grab her arm. She quickly turned around and produced a gawk on her face as if she saw the ghost of her deceased father. It was Deontae.

"So you just gonna up and leave and not come back? Come on, stop playin' mothafuckin' games and bring your ass back home!" Deontae growled, his hand still firmly gripped on Katina's.

"Bestie, lemme call you back. This crazy ass nigga showed up to

my job!"

"Girl, you alright?" Vanessa, one of her home girls asked.

"Yeah, girl. Lemme call you back…"

"Yeah, get the fuck off the phone and talk to ya nigga…"

Katina quickly hung the phone up and then snatched her arm away from Deontae's grip.

The now agitated nurse and mother screwed her face up in disgust and surprise. "First of all, nigga…Why in the FUCK are you showing up at my job? Are you that fucking crazy? Second of all – what don't you get about us being over?!?!" She continued, "We are done! There is nothing more that I want from you. You can't do shit for me. You can't do shit for my kids. GOODBYE. I gotta get to a real job. Something you don't know nothing about."

Deontae looked around his immediate surroundings to see if anybody would notice what he was about to do next. Without hesitation, he pulled out his gloc from his back. He was wearing a black Chicago Bulls jacket to cover up the gun. "Bitch, you think I'm playing with you? You gon bring yo ass home along with my kids or I'm gonna show you how I really feel!"

Tina, almost on the verge of losing her composure, stood her ground and lightly shivered in slight fear. "Oh, so that's the shit you on? You just gon shoot me if I don't follow your commands? Deontae, I thought you were smarter than that…"

Deontae didn't say anything back. His eyes turned to slits. Glancing around once more, he quickly tucked the gun back into his back and slightly shook his head in the affirmative.

"Don't worry, bitch. This shit ain't over. You gon get yours. Do what you gotta do, but trust me, I'mma be back to get what you owe me. Bitch, I held you down when you didn't have shit and when nobody wanted yo fat black ass. But I see what it is. Don't have my kids around no other nigga either or we gon have serious problems, bitch."

Suddenly he turned on his heels and quickly ran away.

Katina closed her eyes and clutched her palpating chest. With her heart ferociously pounding, beating at a million beats per hour, she just knew Deontae was crazy enough to do something stupid. But she couldn't show his ass weakness. She knew if she did and buckled, that was it. He would forever hold her and her kids hostage.

That was the first time ever Deontae had shown that type of potentially violent and dark side to himself, but it came as no surprise to Katina. When niggas quickly realize they've lost something good, they do three things. Fight hard to get it back, let it go and move on, or stop others from having it. In this instance, Deontae was using the fear of murder to stop Katina from moving on. But it didn't work. She

was gonna get hers regardless. Deontae sensed that too, which is why he quickly dipped the fuck out. At that very moment, nothing, not even the threat of death could deter a real ass bitch from doing what she had to do to get hers. That was one of the reasons why Deontae was attracted to Katina in the first place. She was gonna be on her grind no matter what situation she found herself in. Nevertheless, Deontae simply couldn't let it go 'cuz he could already sense his life was now destined to be in somewhat shambles. The strong woman who was holding him down for so long was gone.

Chapter Twenty-Seven

…Every time I close my eyes
I wake up feeling so horny
I can't get you outta my mind
Sexin' you be all I see
I would give anything
Just to make you understand me
I don't give a damn about nothing else
Freek'n you is all I need…

Wednesday morning was slightly more humid than usual. The risen sun was already cooking the city. Rush hour traffic was already roaring throughout the streets. 7:25 tick-tocked on the clock inside of Mr. Garrison's Cadillac DeVille. Jodeci's "Freek'N You" blared from the car's speakers. Fredquisha was sitting in the front passenger seat, staring off into the window. She was trying her best to tune out the 90s throwback jam that Mr. Garrison was whistling to in such a horrid off tune.

With a toothpick slapped in his mouth, the pussy-addicted landlord strolled down Halsted Avenue to drop MooMoo back off at her crib. Some moments later Mr. Garrison pulled into an empty spot on the side street right in front of the entrance of the apartment building. He leaned in, turned the music down and then sat back and yawned. He looked over at MooMoo and scanned her up and down as she sat there silent. She wasn't giving him any eye contact at all.

"Damn, what's wrong wit cha? You hungry or some shit?"

"Nah, I'm good," MooMoo replied solemnly. All she wanted to do by now was run inside the apartment and take a hot bath to get Mr. Garrison's soot off her. The shower back at the Motel didn't do shit given the water couldn't get lukewarm.

"You sure. I can run you by IHOP. I love them red velvet pancakes. Especially with that butter pecan syrup. Them thangs is my shit!"

"Nah, I'm sure I'm good. I got some food in the crib."

"Eww, I know you ain't finna eat nothin' from out of that nasty ass

apartment."

"Fuck you, nigga. It ain't that dirty…"

Mr. Garrison rolled his eyes and chuckled, "Bitch, you a lie."

"Man, whatever, BYE!" Suddenly Fredquisha opened the door, but before she could even get her foot out the door Nate instantly grabbed her and yanked her back into her seat. "Where the fuck you think you goin'? Bitch, you ain't dismissed until I say you can go. Remember, I helped you out. Now do you want this breakfast or not?"

"Mr. Garrison. Can I at least check up on my apartment and see if the social workers came by or some shit?"

"They ain't come by…"

"How you know?"

"'Cuz I had Glen on the lookout. He would've told me if they came. Besides he was also there helping to get your nasty ass apartment together…"

"I think you lyin'…I gotta go check up on my shit, bruh." Fredquisha then attempted to step foot outside the car again, but Nate once more aggressively pulled her back into the car.

"I ain't got no reason to lie to you. Like I said, you leave when I say you leave unless you wanna run me back my five-hunned plus what it cost to clean that nasty ass apartment up…You got the cash like that?"

MooMoo sat back in the seat, folded her arms, took a deep breath and then exhaled with her eyes closed. "Fine, man. Come on. You already know I'm under a lot of stress and shit. Why you fuckin' with me?"

"Damn! I'm tryin' to put some food in yo mouth 'cuz I know you hungry and shit. Now stop trippin'. Let's go check on this apartment and then get something to eat!"

"Just something to eat, right? Nothing else, right?"

Mr. Garrison sneered as he fiddled with the toothpick in his mouth. "Yeah. Just something to eat…"

"Promise?"

"Yeah…Promise…"

"Fine…" Fredquisha then opened the front passenger door and made her way out. Mr. Garrison followed suit.

The pair made their way inside the building and upstairs. Once they arrived at the apartment, Fredquisha pulled out her keys, inserted her apartment key into the door, unlocked it and walked through. She instantly flicked on a light switch in the living room and stood in awe. Complete awe. The apartment had been completely cleaned up from top to fucking bottom. The apartment that was once the epitome of filth and wretchedness unexpectedly looked brand spanking new. It was almost as if the apartment had been gutted out

and made ready for new tenants to move in.

"GODDAMN! SHIT!" Fredquisha smiled as her devious eyes scanned the entire living room. Not a single piece of trash was found on the floor. Bursts of lavender and ocean breeze incense mixed in with potpourri occupied the entire room, instantly taking even Mr. Garrison by surprise.

Fredquisha moved deep into the apartment and then lunged into the kitchen. Not a single dish was in the sink. All the countertops were completely cleaned. Like a crazed manic, she then opened up every single drawer in the kitchen. All the utensils had been cleaned. Plates, bowls and other Tupperware were cleaned and neatly stacked. She opened the fridge. Every single piece of rotting food had been discarded except an unopened bottle of 1800 tequila.

Fredquisha couldn't believe. Guess she had to see everything in person to believe that Mr. Garrison would keep his word and make the apartment look brand new. There was no longer any doubt or anxiety in her mind that she'd pass any type of section 8 inspection or intense interview from a DCFS caseworker. All she had to do now was wait for the social worker to make his or her unannounced visit and she would be in the clear to get her boys back.

"So, how does it look? You fine with the apartment?" Mr. Garrison asked as he looked around in amazement.

"Hell yeah! Shit, them Mexicans work fast!"

"Hell yeah, they do! That's why I use them for some of my other properties I got out in the 'burbs…Speaking of which…" Mr. Garrison made his way closer to Fredquisha and lightly rubbed her shoulder. "You know, if you ever wanna move out of the ghetto, I got a few places I can show you. You can always transfer your voucher out there…"

"Really?" Fredquisha asked. She never gave much thought to leaving the South Side. Shit, this was all she knew and felt super-comfortable staying where she was at. But given that she was still trying to do her best to snag her a new man, aka, Trel, and that she was on the verge of possibly giving birth, maybe a change wouldn't hurt at all.

"But, what I gotta do to get it? 'Cuz ain't shit free…You already made that point several times last night."

Mr. Garrison chuckled. "We can work something out. Just get the damn DCFS off your back. You call up your section 8 caseworker and tell her your situation. I'll go over my current tenant roster and see what leases are ending. Sounds good?"

"I guess…"

"Ok, well…Let's go get some breakfast then," Mr. Garrison smirked.

“Ok…”

“But before we go,” Mr. Garrison licked his lips and then crawled his hand down to Fredquisha’s crotch. “Let me get a quickie…”

“Mr. Nate. Come on now. You said just breakfast and that was it…”

“Yeah, well, I lied…Don’t act like you don’t want it. You know I beat that pussy up.”

“Fine! Come on, dude. You got five minutes!”

“That’s all I need!”

Chapter Twenty-Eight

Beep. Beep. Beep. Beep.

Rays of sunlight peered through the window curtains of Austin's room, injecting life into his eyes. He slowly opened his eyes and yawned. Still hooked up to the EKG machine to monitor his vitals, the beeping sound still lowly blared in the backdrop. Chitchat from nurses and other patients inside the hospital could be heard from a distance. Austin looked up and saw it was 9:55 AM. Still on a morphine drip to subdue his pain, Austin was getting at least fourteen hours a sleep a day. Under any other circumstance, he would've been up by 6 AM. However with the opioid high slowly dripping through his bloodstream, he couldn't help but stay in a deep sleep since he'd been in the hospital.

The door to Austin's room opened. Nurse Tonya coolly strolled in and produced a big smile on her face. "Oh, I see you're awake now!" she exclaimed as she held a tray of breakfast in her hand.

"Yeah," Austin smirked back. Since he'd been admitted into the hospital he was finding himself a bit attracted to the woman. "What you got for me this morning?"

"The usual – I got you some pancakes, an apple, turkey sausage, egg whites and a bowl of cheerios. You need those carbs!" Tonya laughed as she made her way closer to the bed.

Austin attempted to sit himself up but was in slight pain.

"Hold on, I got you," Tonya responded as she put the breakfast tray down on an adjacent countertop and went over to help Austin get himself propped up in the bed.

"Thanks," Austin responded and smirked. "So, you got a man?" Damn, he was bold in asking that.

Nurse Tonya jumped in a tad surprise to the question. "Damn, where did that come from?"

"Just asking…You seem like you got a good head on your shoulders. You got a good job. You're nice. Seem honest."

Tonya didn't respond, she just playfully shook her head. "Well, I did. But he's on bullshit like most of you niggas," Tonya responded.

"Damn, what's that supposed to mean? *'you niggas'*?"

"You know…You men. Black men always be playing games…"

"Men play games regardless of race…Don't make it a black thing."

"Yeah, well. That's all I date anyways. But enough about me. You got a girlfriend? Wife? Significant other?" Tonya made her way over to the countertop where she sat the breakfast tray. She picked it up and meandered back over to Austin and positioned the tray on top of

his waist.

"Ehhh, no. Not at all. Been in here for almost two years. My last relationship was kind of crazy. I got a daughter though. Myyah. Her mother is kind of crazy and filthy. I'm trying to get custody of her…"

"Question for you…Why do you men do that?"

"Do what?"

"Blame the baby mother. Call her crazy. Filthy. Like, didn't you know that before you got into a relationship with her?"

"I mean, I wasn't paying attention like that. I was so dumb and out there. Just wanted ass if you want me to be completely honest with you. I didn't think it would ever go that far, but eventually, it did. Now we got a kid together…"

"Typical…You let the allure of sex pull you in and it blinded you to reality? That's the excuse you're gonna give me?"

"Are you judging me? I mean, I am pretty sure you've made pretty bad decisions when it came to being with people."

Tonya paused for a moment and thought about it… "Yeah, you're right. It is what it is though. Sorry if I come off judgmental."

"It's cool though. I get it."

"Anyways, let me check up on my other patients. You enjoy that breakfast and I'll be back to help you start your physical therapy today."

"Bet…"

"Oh and one thing Austin…I'm a lesbian now," Nurse Tonya casually confessed and smiled.

Austin hung his head in shock. "Really?"

"Yes, really. Talk to you later." Tonya made her way out of the room.

Austin shook his head. "Bitches becoming lesbians left and right nowadays."

~

Austin sat up in his bed and was perusing a course catalog from the University of Illinois-Chicago. Better known as UIC, the university was perhaps the biggest state-based public university inside the City of Chicago. It was Austin's top choice since they had one of the best construction and real estate development bachelor's programs in the Midwest.

Knock. Knock. Knock.

Austin suddenly turned his attention away from the course catalog and towards the door of his room. "Come in," he responded towards the thuds.

Dr. Sterling strolled in with a huge smile on her face. "Austin! I see

you are up and at it! Getting your energy back!"

"Hey, Dr. Sterling! I didn't expect to see you!"

"I know! I just came down here to check up on and give you some good news I found out through the grapevine," Dr. Sterling said as she made her way over to Austin's bed.

"What's that?"

"Well, after what happened on Sunday the Feds have decided to commute your sentence. They're gonna let you out early."

Austin immediately screwed his face up. "Wait, what?!?"

"Yeah…You heard me right. You get out at the end of the week."

With tears damn near forming in his eyes, Austin lowered his head. "Shit, does my mom know?"

"Nope, because I wanted you to do the honors by telling her…in person…"

"Wait, is this a joke, Dr. Sterling? Please tell me you're joking!"

"No, not at all. I'll give Mrs. Watkins a call later on this evening and have her to come down tomorrow so you can tell her the good news. How does that sound?"

"That sounds great…You know Myyah is there with her now!"

"Really? How did that happen?"

"Fredquisha apparently got into some mess with child services. My mom is currently watching Myyah. I really hope this isn't a joke you're telling me, Dr. Sterling, 'cuz that means I get to go home to my baby girl!"

Dr. Sterling leaned over to Austin and pinched his arm. "You felt that?"

"Yeah…"

"Not a dream. It's very real. I'll give Mrs. Watkins soon. Enjoy the rest of your day!"

Chapter Twenty-Nine

Wednesday afternoon. Chicago's South Side. The busy and relatively quiet 2nd floor of Illinois Department of Children and Family Services located right on 62nd and Emerald. The neighborhood: Englewood.

"Hahah! Yess, bissssh! James is a mothafuckin' trip, you hear me! That nigga is so nasty. He had his tongue all deep down my ass last night, you would've swore that nigga was looking for Waldo!"

Shirley McGill, mid-50s, a senior DCFS case manager on the cusp of retirement, made no qualms about talking about her freaky sex life with her close-knit group of co-workers. Between her, Geraldine, Theresa, and Juanita, Shirley was the only married social worker. The rest of the women were either divorced or in on-and-off relationships. Dick desperate they were, the three always huddled around Shirley during the afternoon to hear her rehash her nasty sex stories.

"Yesss girl, I want that done to me! I ain't never had my ass ate!" Geraldine roared and clapped her hands. "Ohhh, chile! I cain't even imagine! YESS GUHL! I SAID CAIN'T!" she barked sticking her tongue out. Geraldine was in her early 40s and resembled a voluptuous Anita Baker with a gap in between her two front teeth.

"Hahah! Hoe, you a trip! That's just nasty. I wouldn't dare have a nigga stick his tongue in my ass. That's doin' too much. Just give me some bomb ass head and dick and I'm good," Theresa remarked as she smacked on a Harold's wing. Fried extra hard. Doused in mild sauce. Salt and pepper. Just how Theresa liked it.

Theresa, approaching the age of fifty, was a solid four hundred pounds. Rumor had it her husband Darius left her…for another man. Her husband leaving her was one of the major reasons she spiraled into a depression and ended up developing an eating disorder. Although she was the heaviest in the group, ironically, she was the most stylish. Despite her size, when she wasn't blowing her money on fast food, she was blowing it at the MAC store, designer clothes, and shoes. Guess you can do that when you are making nearly $85,000 a year as a state-based social worker. Couldn't do that working for a private, nonprofit agency.

“Girl, that’s why yo ass ain’t got no man now. You too prissy. You better stop being prissy with that pussy!” Shirley jokingly spat back to her social worker-colleague smacking on the chicken wing.

Shirley was a tad voluptuous herself. Her skin tone radiated mahogany brown. Long, silky jet black hair she attributed to her “Indian” roots ran down her thick back. Despite her age, she didn’t have a single strand of gray. James, her husband of over thirty years, was so madly in love with the woman, he showered her with gifts and flowers every day. And Shirley loved it because every time an edible arrangement showed up to the office, she had to show off to all the women in her office. Pussy must taste like birthday cake because Shirley made it known James was eating it every night like a fat five-year-old.

Theresa rolled her eyes and produced a nasty yet non-serious scowl on her face. “Bitch, it’s one thing to get my pussy ate,” Theresa mumbled as she took another bite from the chicken wing and licked her mouth. “But it’s another to let a man stick his tongue down in my ass. The fuck? He don’t know what I ate for the day? What if I just took a big shit?”

“Girl, you overthinkin’ it. I don’t give a fuck what nobody says. I’m gon get my ass ate if a nigga offers it. And James offered. Shiit!” Shirley laughed. “Anyways, chile, what time is it?” she asked as she spun around in her seat and stared into her cubicle.

“Almost 2 PM…” Juanita commented as she caught a quick gaze of the time on the bottom right corner of her government-issued laptop’s screen.

Shirley exhaled and rolled her eyes. She looked down at her desk and saw a mound of cases she had to work on today. Shirley knew she had to work on a few unannounced house visits today but was pussyfooting given she truly didn’t care about her job anymore. A thirty year veteran with the Illinois Department of Children and Family Services, Shirley was less than a year away from retirement. With nearly four months of sick and vacation saved up in her PTO bank, she could’ve called off for the rest of the day. However, Charles, the director of the field office, needed her to help with some extra cases that recently came down the pipeline.

“Let’s see which one of these ‘outstanding’ mothers I gotta go visit today,” Shirley joked, sarcasm lacing her words. She picked up a manila folder and went over an intake form from the child abuse hotline. “Myyah Chennelle Watkins…mother Fredquisha Pierce…They don’t live too far away from here. 63rd and Halsted…Intake scored her a 7 out of 10…Ughhh, I do not feel like dealing with these people today. Lord knows I don’t!”

Shirley turned to Juanita, “Hey….Juanita. You ever heard of heffa?

Fredquisha Pierce? Her mama must've been on crack when she named her this horrible ass name! She don't stay too far away from here."

"Nah, I ain't never heard that name," Juanita answered as she too fumbled through some paperwork.

Shirley fumbled through the file and went over details reported by Mrs. Watkins. "Apparently she got this girl living in filth. Grandma called in and said the girl gets hit and cursed out daily."

The senior-level social worker then powered on her laptop and click on the icon on the desktop taking her DCFS' case management software. The software was linked to a massive database that tracked all abuse hotline call-ins, prior child abuse cases that were either closed or under current investigation, as well as contemporaneous notes and documents of other social workers. Shirley typed in Fredquisha's full name in the search bar. The child abuse hotline case popped up. But that file was just a duplicate of the already printed file Shirley had in her possession. She scrolled down and saw that a section 8 program manager from Chicago Housing Authority had entered in some information in regards to Fredquisha's household. She opened the document and quickly skimmed it. Shirley learned that Fredquisha has been a section 8 voucher recipient for some years but had no prior complaints from landlords or from the housing authority. She didn't have a criminal record either. As she kept digging finally she stumbled upon a recently updated case entered into the system from the Chicago Police Department. She glanced over the police report and saw that Chicago PD had put in a request to have a social worker conduct an investigation based on the recent fight Fredquisha had with her two sons. Shirley absorbed all the details of the incident and then took notes in regards to possible questions she was going to as Fredquisha. She closed her laptop and packed her purse with her keys and cell phone. "Alright, ya'll. Lemme go do this quick check-up on this hussy. I'mma probably just head on home afterward. Give me a call if ya'll need anything."

"Alright, girl," Theresa mumbled as she slurped on a peach NeHi.

Shirley got up from her seat and slowly made her way out of the building and to her Ford Explorer in the building's parking lot. "Can't wait until I'm retired from this raggedy ass mothafucka…"

~

"Man, these bitches is just so basic! Couldn't be me! Why these hoes be postin' all this all their personal business on social media and shit?!?" Fredquisha mumbled to herself, puffing on a Newport.

Earlier while she was sitting down, wasting time, anticipating a social worker to arrive at her 'newly renovated apartment', she

scrolled through her Facebook newsfeed and came across a video of some girl she went to high school with years ago. The chick was going off on Facebook live trying to expose her bestie for sleeping with her husband.

"I always knew Terrell was a lyin' ass dog anyways…"

KNOCK! KNOCK! KNOCK!

MooMoo jumped at the sound of thunderous knocks at her front door. Was that a social worker? "Coming!" she yelled, quickly changing the tone of her voice.

Earlier Fredquisha had taken a shower and put on a presentable outfit. A basic white tee. Jeans. Some flip-flops. Nothing that would make her look too "ratchet". The first impression was the best impression.

She spent most of her morning doing her best to tidy up a bit, ensuring the apartment still appeared in excellent shape. Then again, it had only been a good 24 hours since it was completely cleaned out, exterminated and revamped.

MooMoo lunged at the door, and just as she was about to open it, she quickly realized she still had the cigarette in her mouth. "Oh fuck, fuck, fuck!" she gasped as she dashed back over to her living room and put the cigarette out in an ashtray. A brand new one at that. She'd get back to the half-smoked square later. She picked up a bottle of air freshener on the coffee table, sprayed fervently all over and then threw the bottle back onto the table.

KNOCK! KNOCK!

"Sorry! Here I come!" Fredquisha barked as she literally threw herself at the door and opened it. She clutched her chest and tried to control her breathing, but her entire disposition suddenly changed once her eyes landed on the individual in front of her. It was her long-time caseworker from Chicago Housing Authority, Victoria Bivens.

"Hey…Vicky! What you doin' over here?" Fredquisha inquired in full-on surprise. She tried to act dumb but she now she assumed there was a possibility Mr. Garrison snaked her and went ahead and called Section 8 to get her kicked out. Guess it was his way of trying to cover his behind in case the State came after him and tried to then petition to get him removed from being a part of the Section 8 program.

"Nothing much, Fredquisha," Vicky nonchalantly smiled. "So, wassup with this call I got from DCFS?" the tall, slender dark-skinned housing program manager asked.

"What you mean?"

"Well, actually, can I come in?"

"Yeah, sure…"

Fredquisha opened the door more and led the caseworker in. Vicky slowly peered around the living room and then sniffed.

“Damn, it smells very nice in here! What kind of incense is that?” she asked, instantly turning her attention towards Fredquisha.

“Oh, it’s some potpourri. I got it from the Dollar Store on Stony Island.”

“Oh, damn, I need to get me some. Anyways, let’s have a seat and talk for a second…”

“Ok, cool.”

The two women strolled over to the couch. Television was blaring in the background. Fredquisha picked up the tv’s remote control and turned it off. “So, wassup?” Fredquisha nervously asked as she scratched her bonnet-covered head.

“Well, I just got a call from a caseworker down at DCFS. Mrs. McGill. Actually, her and I used to work together years ago when I used to work for the State. She was on her way over here to do an unannounced visit to look into this child abuse call that came into the DCFS hotline over the weekend. Myyah’s grandmother called in and said that you had been hurting the girl, abusing her and calling her names. Then, she also told me some days ago you got into a fight with your boys? What’s really going on?”

Fredquisha lowered her gaze and shook her head. Suddenly she busted out in tears and began to wail. “Mrs. Watkins! Austin’s mama is such a bully! She’s doing everything in her power to get Myyah taking away from me! I do not be hitting that girl other than just discipline her when she act up around the house!”

“So, you haven’t been hitting her or cursing her out?”

“NO!” Fredquisha sniffled and wiped her runny nose. “I mean, from time to time, I might give her a little tap on her ass, but I do not be punching her! That’s my daughter. I love her! Why would I do all that?!?!”

“Ok, calm down, I get it. It looks like you’re under a lot of stress…” Vicky then turned her attention deep into the apartment and looked around. “Another thing she said when she called into the abuse hotline was that the apartment was a complete disaster. But that seems to not be the case, so I can check that off my list of complaints.”

“Right! See what I mean. That bitch is just fucking with me! FOR NO REASON! She just mad because Austin, Myyah’s daddy, is in jail and she don’t want me to have my baby! She really trying to get me all messed up!”

Fredquisha’s tone became a lot more vicious and audible. Vicky was looking increasingly concerned by the aggressive body language MooMoo was projecting onto her.

“Ok, just calm down,” Vicky consoled as she held hands up, palms facing Fredquisha, letting her know she need to stop and take and get a control of herself.

“Sorry, I’m just goin’ through it right now. I’ve been trying to look for a job. Money is getting tight. My boys are getting grown and grown…”

“Yes, and about that…So you three got into a big fight?”

“Yes, unfortunately…”

“How’d that happen?”

Fredquisha paused for a moment. She couldn’t dare confess and tell the woman Quimani got his damn babysitter pregnant. “I don’t know. They just going through puberty. They got some anger management issues. I think it was because I threatened to take their PlayStation away.”

“Ok, well. Where are they at now?”

“They with their grandma. Police told me to stay away until DCFS did an investigation or else I could into trouble.”

“Ok, well…Hey, fights happen. I used to get into all the time with my mother, so I understand. Anyways, it seems as though the incident wasn’t that big of a deal. And where is Myyah?”

Fredquisha once again lowered her head. “She…She never came back from her grandma’s place. I let her stay with Mrs. Watkins for the weekend but Mrs. Watkins went behind my back and pulled that big ass stunt!”

“Oh…Ok. Yeah. She even called the local police station out there and had Myyah talk to a detective that works closely with child abuse cases. They can’t do anything though until DCFS does an investigation and plus it’s outside of their jurisdiction. They referred it over to Chicago Police Department. Really, it’s all in Mrs. McGill’s hands.”

“Ok…” Fredquisha continued to sob.

“Just to let you know, I kind of talked Mrs. McGill from coming over here. She was literally on her way, but she started to feel a bit under the weather. So, she gave me a call to see if I could swing by and do a quick home visit and ask you some questions…She still has to do an interview though.”

“Ok…”

“And by interview, I mean she’s going to interview your sons and Myyah.”

“How she gon do that if Myyah ain’t here…”

“Well, first of all, technically if you have custody over Myyah and you haven’t been found yet to do anything wrong, Myyah is supposed to be here. Has she been missing school?”

“YESS!” Fredquisha barked.

“Ok, well that’s a big no-no. I’mma gonna go ahead and let Mrs. McGill know Myyah is still staying with the grandmother. Also, I’ll go ahead and give the police department out where Mrs. Watkins lives a call to let them know Myyah needs to be back immediately or she

could be charged with kidnapping."

"Ok, that's what I thought! I just don't understand why that lady is playing games with me!"

"Hey, look. It happens. Families get into these disputes. People make up false abuse claims to get revenge for this and that. I see it all the time. This just sounds like all one big mix-up. Anyways, let me get going so we can get Myyah back home. She might have to stay with your mother until Mrs. McGill completes her interviews and investigation. Ok?"

"Ok. I understand."

"Good. Anywho – girl – let me get going. I got a hair appointment at 4 that I do not wanna miss! Traffic is already starting to get bad."

"Ok, thank you so much, Vicky. I promise you I ain't been hitting my kids. I love them too much."

"I hear you, lady. I understand. Anyways, let me get going. If you need anything, just give me a call. You still got my number, right?"

"Yeah."

"Ok, and on my way to my hair appointment I'll give Mrs. McGill a call and let her know what I observed. I gotta document this for CHA regulations though. It won't count against you, but we gotta just put this on our system. I'll also give the detective out in Matteson a call and let him know Mrs. Watkins needs to return Myyah ASAP."

"Ok, sounds great. Thank you so much!"

"No worries, girl! This is my job! I'm getting paid to help people!"

Vicky produced a light smile and stood up. She adjusted her outfit and made her way out the door. Fredquisha quickly locked the door, dashed over to her couch and picked up her phone. She pulled up her mother's phone number and hit dial.

Ring. Ring. Ring. Ring.

"Wassup, bitch? Social worker hoe came over yet?"

"Bitch! My case manager from Section 8 did! You know…that tall, black ass bitch Vicky with no edges?"

"Oh yeah. She nice! Don't say that about her!"

"That bitch ugly as fuck! Anyways! She stopped the social worker from coming over here. GIRL! SHE SAVED MY LIFE!"

"What you mean she stopped her?"

"Apparently the social worker lady and Vicky know each other. So she called her and asked her to do the home visit until she do an interview with Quimani, Zy'meer and Myyah! Then she gon tell me Mrs. Watkins need to return Myyah ASAP. She gon call the police too!"

"See, I told you! I don't know why that boujee bitch thought she was gonna keep my mothafuckin' granddaughter. Bitch had me fucked up."

“She said she might have to stay with you too!” Fredquisha, excited more than ever now, quickly changed her disposition. She picked up her pack of cigarette from off the coffee table, slapped a cig in her mouth and lit up as her mother continued to rant.

“Well, let me try to clean my shit up a bit before they try to come after me. You and yo children ain’t gon fuck wit my program, hoe!”.

“Anyways…How Quimani and Zy’meer doing?”

“Girl…Usual. Eating up all my food. Anyways, if that social worker lady finna come by to talk to them, I’mma need them to set them straight. ‘Cuz the last thing you need is for their bad asses to spill ya business.”

“Ok, well, tell them I said I’ll do anything to make up for what I did to them. I’ll take them to Universal Studios, Disney World, and shit. I’ll take them to get some deep dish pizza in Downtown. Whatever…”

“Right. You better. ‘Cuz you gon need them to lie their asses off. The only one I’m worried about is Myyah. How you gon get her straight?”

“Shit, I don’t even know…”

“Don’t worry about it. I’ll take care of it when she get here later tonight.”

Chapter Thirty

Late Wednesday afternoon. Almost evening. Suburban Matteson. The quiet, comfy Watkins Residence.

Myyah sat peacefully and rapt in front of Mrs. Watkins large flat screen television in the dimly lit living room.

"Do you wanna build a snowman? Come on, let's go and play!"

Princess Anna's soft and angelic lyrics from Disney movie "Frozen" boomed from the television's speakers. This was the first time ever Myyah had watched Frozen and she was wholly captivated. Nonetheless, despite Frozen being a cult classic for all children across the globe, nothing could dissuade Myyah from keeping The Princess And The Frog from being her all-time Disney fave.

Mrs. Watkins, still a bit nerve wrecked, strolled into the living room and smiled as she stared at her granddaughter. "Hey, baby girl! Guess what! I just got off the phone with your daddy and he has some exciting news to tell me tomorrow!"

Myyah twirled her attention briefly away from the television screen and beamed back at her granny. "What did daddy say, grandma?"

"I don't know! He said it's a surprise and he doesn't wanna tell me until tomorrow when I go visit him!"

"Oh, ok!"

Myyah without hesitation threw her attention back to the movie. She didn't want to miss a single second. With the biggest smile running from the Atlantic to the Pacific on her angelic brown face, the girl further surrendered her nubile doe eyes into the icy yet heavenly imagery of the Disney cartoon.

Sitting Indian style only a few feet away from the television, she held her head in her the palms of her hand and just kept smiling away. Despite all the relentless pain and horrid abuse she suffered at the hands of Fredquisha, nothing could still wipe this girl's incorruptibility away. Despite having to be forced to mature for her age, Myyah was still an endearing six-year-old to her core who enjoyed the simplicity of a cartoon.

So, baby girl just kept on smiling…

This was the life she'd always imagined she'd have one day. To be in the comfort of a loving home, away from the desolation and darkness of the violent ghetto and pervasive squalor her egg donor-birth canal better known as her 'mother' kept her imprisoned in.

This was if the life she'd always dreamt about during those dreadful, teary nights after a sadistic ass beating – to be around those who truly cared for her and let her be herself. Not always on guard. No paranoia or fear running through her limber body. Hopefully soon once daddy gets released from jail, her, Daddy, Granny, and Uncle Jonah could all live together in the spacious house and be a healthy, happy and wholesome family. Live, laugh and love into eternity. Was that too much too much for baby girl to ask for?

The way Myyah was so entranced with the film was refreshing for Mrs. Watkins to observe, but it was also gut-wrenching given for the grandmother. In her mind, no child should be so enthralled to the point of wanting to watch hours upon hours of television like this. The bitter reality though was that the cartoons were nothing more than animated escapism for the poor girl.

Jonah, still a bit hazy from a quick cat nap, slowly sauntered into the living room. "Hey, ya'll…What you watchin' there, princess?" Jonah let out a laugh as he asked his awe-struck niece.

"I'm watching Frozen! I ain't never seen this movie before, Uncle Jonah! It's so good!"

"Really? Every girl I know has seen this! You never saw this before?"

"Nope! Never"

Jonah quickly remembered who her mother was. His smile devolved into flatness. "Oh, well, I hope you like it. We can go out later tonight and get you some more movies if you like!"

"Ok!" Myyah chirped, not even giving Jonah eye contact. Her eyes were very much glued to the television.

Austin chuckled and moved closer to his mother. Mrs. Watkins was sitting on the couch observing baby girl. "So, any word yet from the police or DCFS?" Jonah quietly asked as he sat down.

"Nope…not yet…"

Buzz. Buzz. Buzz. Mrs. Watkins' phone vibrated in her pocket. She whipped it out and glared down at the unfamiliar 708 area code. Local to Chicago's south suburbs.

"Lemme see who this," Mrs. Watkins said as she got up from the couch and made her way deep into the kitchen. She didn't want to disturb Myyah from watching her movie.

Mrs. Watkins answered the phone, "Good evening…"

The man on the other end cleared his throat. "Hey, Mrs. Watkins? This is Detective Jackson with the Matteson Police Department. I have

some updates to give you in regards to Myyah…"

"Oh, hey, good evening Detective. I wasn't expecting your call at all! I hope it's good news." A tinge of nausea erupted from pits of Mrs. Watkins stomach.

"So, I was just informed by a case manager through Chicago Housing Authority and DCFS that you are currently keeping Myyah at your residence? Is this true?"

"Well, yes it is. I can't have that girl going back to her mother's place until I'm confident someone is going to keep her safe."

"Mrs. Watkins…." Detective Jackson exhaled. "Technically you can't do that. I am sure you are aware of this."

Mrs. Watkins closed her eyes and pursed her lips. "Yes, I know *technically* I wasn't supposed to do this, but I hadn't heard anything since the weekend in regards to my call. Why is it taking them so long for DCFS to do some sort of emergency investigation? Do they not think this is serious? Didn't you give them all the information Myyah told you?"

"Yes, I referred everything over to the Chicago Police Department. And yes, they have the case in their hands, Mrs. Watkins. DCFS is doing an investigation as we speak, but like I told you a few days ago, you have to let them do what they have to do before any serious moves are made. What you did is technically a felony and you could definitely serve jail time."

Fighting back tears, Mrs. Watkins slowly shook her head no. She couldn't fathom the sheer incompetence of the police department and DCFS, and deep down she just knew something bad, really bad, was bound to happen to Myyah.

"So, what exactly are you telling me, Detective Jackson?"

"Ma'am, what I'm telling you is that Myyah must immediately go back to her legal guardian or unfortunately I am going to have to arrest you and charge you with kidnapping and child endangerment…"

"Sir, please. This just isn't right. Can you all just not hol—"

Detective Jackson interrupted, "Mrs. Watkins. I have to be very clear with you. Myself, along with a Chicago police officer and a DCFS caseworker will be at your residence in the next thirty minutes to pick up Myyah."

"Ok…"

"Look, I'm sorry this has to happen, but this is just the law. We have to respect the process and let the investigators do their job."

"I understand…"

"Great. See you in thirty minutes."

"Ok," Mrs. Watkins then hung up her phone.

Jonah unbeknownst to Mrs. Watkins was standing off to the side

listening to the exchange. “Mama…What’s wrong?”

Mrs. Watkins slowly spun her head to Jonah and shone grief buried in the features of her narrow face. “Myyah has to go back. Or I’m going to get in trouble. Cops and a social worker will be here in thirty minutes to take her back to the city.”

Jonah took in a deep breath and exhaled, “See, mama. I told you we should’ve never done this.”

Mrs. Watkins got up from the seat and began to release tears of sorrow. “I know, I know. I just thought maybe perhaps something miraculous would happen. I guess not. Let me go get her bags packed.”

“How are we going to tell her?” Jonah asked with a lowered gaze.

“Ughhh…I guess I’ll have to tell her now.”

Mrs. Watkins, nervous more than ever to deliver the devastating news, sauntered into the living room. Myyah’s gaze was still glued to the television. A faint smile still present on her face.

“Hey, umm, Myyah, baby girl. Let’s go upstairs right quick. Granny needs to talk to you, ok?”

“Granny, can we talk later ‘cuz the movie is so good!”

“It’s very important Myyah.”

“Ok.” Baby girl’s light response was respectful. She stood up and walked over to grandma, instantly grabbing her hand.

Silent, once the duo made their way upstairs and into her ‘room’, Mrs. Watkins gently closed the door and escorted the girl to her bed. She sat her down and rubbed her back as she looked deep into her unassuming eyes.

This was going to be the hardest thing to tell the girl. Mrs. Watkins almost felt like she was about to reveal to the girl the death of a close relative. Grandma exhaled.

“Baby girl…I know I said you can stay here until your daddy gets out and you won’t have to go back to live with Fredquisha. But unfortunately, until the police arrest her…”

Mrs. Watkins struggled with her tears. “…You’re gonna have to go back home.”

Myyah’s mouth instantly hung open and her eyes widened in fear. “But Grandma, you said that I wouldn’t have to go back to Fredquisha’s place.”

“I know. I’m so sorry Myyah. It’s just that we have to follow the rules. I can’t just take you just yet. I am going to fight to get you. You just might have to stay at Fredquisha’s place until I can get you.”

“But how long is that gonna take?”

Mrs. Watkins could see the sadness quickly overtake baby girl’s face.

“I don’t know, but I am going to pray it won’t be too long. I swear

to God, child, I'm gonna make sure you are safe."

"Grandma. I'll do whatever it takes to not have to go back. I can hide. I can go hide in the closet and you can say you lost me."

Mrs. Watkins let out a nervous chuckle, "Myyah, I can't hide you. I can get in trouble."

"Ok…" Myyah's eyes began to swell with an ocean of painful tears.

"Listen, baby girl. Do not cry. You're gonna make me cry. I don't want you to go either, but the policeman called me and said you have to go back to Fredquisha's place or I could go to jail. Do you want me to go to jail?"

"No…"

"Ok, well. Don't cry. You just need to be strong for Grandma. Strong for your daddy. Strong for yourself. I know this is not the news you wanna hear, but we just gotta keep praying and hoping God is going to change this situation for us. You understand?"

Myyah wiped the few tears that trickled down her face. Why was God forsaking her like this? she thought to herself.

"Here, let's get your stuff packed up…"

"Ok," baby girl replied nonchalantly. Death-like silence occupied the room that was now once again a guestroom.

"Grandma…"

"Yes, darling?"

"What will you all do if I die? I know I'm going to die if I go back."

Mrs. Watkins immediately grew terrified at hearing that question. She shivered, shocked Myyah would even bring her possible death into the equation.

"What? Why did you ask me that? Don't say that! You're not gonna die, ok?" Mrs. Watkin cried. She hugged Myyah and embraced her tightly. Although Mrs. Watkins didn't want to let the idea of Myyah's death flow through her head, it was very much a possibility if the situation of abuse was that grave.

Mrs. Watkins held the girl for a few more minutes and then let her go. She got up and began to pack up the girl's belongings. In less than fifteen minutes now the grieving grandmother expected the law to show up and do what they very much accused her of – kidnap her granddaughter and endanger her life by putting her back into the custody of Fredquisha.

A good fifteen minutes expired…

Ding-Dong. The doorbell rung, echoing all the way upstairs. Myyah and Mrs. Watkins were still in the room, trying their best to appreciate every single, last second they had together.

Grandma's body shuddered at the sound of the sharp melodic doorbell. "That must be Detective Jackson. Come on. Let's go downstairs."

Myyah didn't say anything. Baby girl's face glowered. A pall of gloom occupied her childish facial features. She stood up from the bed and slowly trailed her grandmother downstairs. The moment the two entered the foyer, Jonah was already standing there attentive at the door. Detective Jackson, along with a Chicago Police Officer stood off to the side. A Latina-looking woman, presumably the DCFS social worker, stood idly anticipating the girl.

"Good evening, Mrs. Watkins. This is Officer Jiminewski from the Chicago Police Department and Ms. Gonzalez from DCFS."

"Evening, ma'am," the short and stubby white Chicago police officer smiled and nodded. "Good evening," Mrs. Watkins responded.

"Good evening, ma'am. Is this Ms. Myyah?" Ms. Gonzales grinned.

Bitch, who else would it be? Mrs. Watkins thought to herself just as a scowl entered her facial expression. Mrs. Watkins glanced down at Myyah and slowly rubbed her back.

"Yes, it is…" Mrs. Watkins replied.

"Myyah, they are going to take you back home, ok?" Ms. Gonzales said.

She grabbed Myyah's somewhat resistant soft hand and gently pulled her to the door.

"We will be in touch, ma'am," Ms. Gonzalez further stated, looking at Mrs. Watkins with her stern, judging eyes.

Detective Jackson walked up to Mrs. Watkins, "Is this her belongings?" he asked.

"Yes…"

"Great, I'll take those," Detective Jackson took Myyah's belongs and then regrouped with Officer Jiminewski and Ms. Gonzales, Myyah by her side.

"Everything is gonna be alright, Myyah. Don't worry. We are going to help you."

Myyah instantly screwed up her face and without hesitation, the tears fell down her face. She wailed, "GRANDMA, PLEASE NO!"

"Myyah, calm down. It's gonna be alright! I promise you, baby girl! Don't be afraid."

"NO! PLEASE!" Myyah attempted to run off, but before she could Ms. Gonzales held her back.

Mrs. Watkins clutched mouth. Tears swam down her cheeks. Jonah lowered his gaze as his own tears dropped down to the floor.

"Don't worry, Myyah. We are gonna make sure you are ok, but you have to go back to your other grandmother!" The social worker did her best to give the girl her assurance, but she didn't believe her. Her wailing intensified.

"Ok, let's go before this gets any worse," Detective Jackson demanded as he shuttled himself along with the Chicago officer, Ms.

Gonzales, and Myyah out of the front door.

Mrs. Watkins and Jonah slowly trailed them and as Myyah slowly trekked away her wails became more and more distant. Officer Jiminewski opened up the back seat to his unmarked beige CPD-issued Crown Vic and put the innocent yet defiant abused girl in the backseat. Ms. Gonzales got in the front. Detective Jackson placed Myyah's belongings in the trunk.

Detective Jackson then made his way over to his black Matteson Police Department Crown Vic, hopped in the front and waited for the Chicago officer lead the way. Myyah looked out the back passenger seat of the car, continuing to cry. Her eyes wide open and reddened. Cheeks rosy. Her mouth slobbered. That was the last parting image Mrs. Watkins now had in her meek possession of her granddaughter as the two cop cars sailed off into the setting Chicago sun.

Chapter Thirty-One

7:23 PM flashed on the CPD Crown Victoria's radio.

Partly cloudy lavender and bronze skies shone as the sun began to sink along the vast horizon, skyscrapers in the backdrop, making way for the moon. Fading orange sunlight glowed. Evening prepared to cast its shroud of darkness over the city. Perhaps the dimming sunlight gifted a window of opportunity; a small, glimmering chance of hope for poor Myyah to escape this looming, dreadful reality she was about to re-enter in Englewood. Was there a possibility somehow, some way Officer Jiminewski would suddenly turn the car around and take her back to Matteson to be with her grandmother, the girl wondered.

Myyah sat back in her seat, seatbelt locked across her tiny chest. Baby girl peered out of the tinted, guarded passenger window as the Crown Vic hit seventy-five on I-57. Her eyes weren't latched onto the constantly changing scenery. She was adrift in her own imagination, doing her best to subdue the tremoring fear growing in her abdomen. The trauma of having her emotions toyed with shut her down. Silent – she couldn't ponder on anything else other than the terror she was about to experience and how she could escape.

"So, Myyah…What do you like to do for fun?" Ms. Gonzales asked.

Myyah didn't respond. She kept gazing out the window.

Ms. Gonzales turned in her seat and scanned the motionless girl up and down.

"It's gonna be ok. We're gonna make sure you're ok."

Myyah still didn't respond.

"You want some candy? I have a Snicker's bar…" Ms. Gonzales created a nervy grin on her wide, tanned face.

"No," Myyah mumbled.

"Ok…" Ms. Gonzales turned back into her seat. No one else said anything for the remainder of the ride.

As the police car entered city limits, familiar Southside territory seeped into Myyah's eyes. She knew they weren't too far away from the apartment on 63rd street. Ten to fifteen minutes away she figured. Her breathing ticked up a bit.

The Crown Vic hit light yet steady traffic. Moments later, instead

of getting off on 63rd street, the officer pulled off 71st and headed east. Myyah was now confused. Although she was six and still didn't have a solid grasp on a sense of direction, she didn't recognize the area they were trekking towards.

The city blocks now completely unfamiliar, the area wasn't ass teeming with dilapidation as her native Englewood. This area was a tad denser with storefronts, bungalows, apartment buildings and three flats. The Crown Vic came up to Bennett Avenue and made a quick right. Some apartment buildings down, the cop car stopped in the middle of the packed one-way street. The officer flicked on his police lights. No sirens blared. Flashing Chicago cop blue light bounced off the cars parked along the street. Light even bounced off the windows of the apartment buildings that lined the dark avenue.

"We're here," Officer Jiminewski said.

"Great…Myyah, this is your other grandmother's place. You have to temporarily stay here for a while, ok?"

"How long I gotta stay here?" Myyah inquired.

"It might be a for a few days. Maybe even a little bit longer. But it shouldn't be that long?"

"Well, why can't I just stay with my other grandma? This grandma don't like me…"

"What makes you say that?"

"'Cuz she just don't like me. She treat me differently than the other kids."

"Ok, well, you won't have to stay here that much longer. We are gonna see what problems are going on and if it turns out that your mother or grandmother can't keep you, there is a good chance you will go back to your other grandmother, ok?"

"Are you lying to me?"

Ms. Gonzales was caught by surprise by the stern, terse question coming from the six-year-old.

"No, I am not lying. I am telling you the truth. Don't worry, ok?"

Myyah didn't respond. Ms. Gonzales glanced over at the unfazed officer. He didn't care quite honestly. This was the end of his shift and he just wanted to make it back to his condo on the Northwest Side in time to crack a few beers and catch this Chicago White Sox documentary that was coming on ESPN at 10. "Ready?" he asked Ms. Gonzales. "Yeah," the social worker exhaled.

The officer got out followed by Ms. Gonzales. Once Myyah was helped out of the car, the officer grabbed her belongings from the trunk and the trio proceeded to make their way towards the entrance of the vast South Shore apartment building. Ms. Gonzales searched for Evelyn's apartment number on the large doorbell panel near the door. Buzzzzzz.

“HELLO?” Evelyn barked.

Ms. Gonzales leaned in a bit and spoke into the cruddy silver speaker slot. “Hey, Evelyn. This is Ms. Gonzales with DCFS. I have your granddaughter with me downstairs.”

“OK!!!”

Buzzzzzzzzz. The front door opened. The trio strolled in. Myyah in front. They made their way to the fifth floor of the rank, piss and cigarette-smelling building.

~

Knock! Knock!

Myyah, Officer Jiminewski, and Ms. Gonzales stood idly awaiting Evelyn to open her front door. Within seconds it flew open.

“Heyyyyyyy! Wassup, Myyah!” Evelyn put on the biggest fake smile known to humanity exposing her dark, straight teeth – a sign she’d been a chain smoker all her life. Her lips purple and plump like her daughter’s, Evelyn was an occasional weed smoker, but she could blow a carton of Newports away every day. Luckily for her cigs were fucking expensive in the city. She probably would’ve been in hospice by now, dying from lung cancer if cigs were as cheap as they were in Indiana.

Myyah didn’t respond, let alone move at all to the sound of her so-called other grandmother’s welcome. She just stood there, gawked at her, not even a smile could come across her face.

It was so hard for Myyah to understand she was even here, staring at this woman who was the complete antithesis to her other grandmother. Myyah barely interacted with this woman. Fredquisha barely let her mother babysit the girl. Shit, truth was Evelyn never ever offered to even volunteer. She too held some slight disdain for Austin and as a result his progeny, Myyah.

Besides that, Mrs. Watkins projected all-around positive vibes. She was fit. Endearing. Had a zestfulness to her that no one could deny.

Evelyn, on the other hand, looked like Shrek and Fredquisha had a secret love child. Shrek-quisha. This grandma was dumpy, looked like she hadn’t bathed in days. Always wore some cheap Wal-Mart one-piece romper. Flip flops always were on her crusty, ashy, and pudgy feet. She was a tad lighter in complexion than her daughter, but the blackest thing on her body aside from her tobacco-stained lips were her elbows and ankles. Those muhfuckas were South Sudan black. And just like her daughter, her flabby, undefined arms were exposed to the world, revealing fading tattoos that were probably etched on by some unlicensed tattoo artist.

“WELL! Come on in! Don’t be shy!”

Evelyn suddenly grabbed Myyah's wrist and pulled her into the hazy apartment.

"Where should I put these bags, ma'am?" Officer Jiminewski asked. He was averse to ambling inside the apartment.

"Hold on…DONTERIO! COME GET THESE BAGS FROM THIS OFFICER!" Grandma Evelyn growled to her youngest son, Fredquisha's youngest brother, Myyah's other uncle.

The tall, dark-skinned, dreadheaded uncle who had nothing on but a wife beater and some off-brand basketball shorts, strolled over and took the bags from the cop. "Wassup, Myyah, I ain't seent you in a minute! Damn guhl, you gettin' big as shit! What yo stupid mama been feeding you?"

Of course, Myyah didn't respond. She just tightened her lips and scanned the cluttered the apartment. It wasn't as viscerally nasty as her mother's, but it was cluttered enough to make her skin crawl and itch.

"Whatever, don't talk to me then…" Donterio threw the bags down near a kitchen counter and made his way back to his room.

Ms. Gonzales took mental notes too of just how a tad bit filthy the apartment was and wondered if this was a good idea, after all, to drop the girl off at the grandmother's apartment.

"HEY! QUIMANI AND ZY'MEER! YO SISTA IS HERE! COME OUT HERE!" Evelyn screamed at the top of her lungs. Within seconds the two bad ass brothers made their presence within the living room and laughed. "What she doin' here? Why she not at mama's house?!?" Zy'meer laughed.

Quimani playfully pushed the girl. She quickly stuck her hand out and pushed him back. "Don't touch me!"

"Girl, who you talkin' to! I'm yo older brother. You 'pose to respeck me!"

"I DON'T HAVE TO! YOU NOT FREDQUISHA AND YOU NOT MY DADDY!"

"Fuck yo daddy! He in jail! Dumb nigga!"

Evelyn gawked at the siblings and quickly intervened to dead the brewing fight. "HEY! YA'LL CUT THAT OUT! LEAVE MYYAH ALONE AND GO BACK TO YOUR ROOM! NOW!"

Zy'meer stuck his tongue out. "That's why you ain't got no room and we do!" he mocked as he and his brother took off running down the dimly lit apartment hallway.

"Sorry about that ya'll. You know these kids are something else…"

Ms. Gonzales looked a bit bothered. She glanced at Officer Jiminewski. He was unfazed. He yawned and rubbed his chest. "So, is there anything else we need to do Ms. Gonzales?" He asked. It was so evident by now to Ms. Gonzales that the uncaring cop was ready to

get the fuck up out of there.

"Yeah, let me just talk to Myyah for a second…in private. If you don't mind, ok?"

"Ok…" the officer began to walk off, "I'll be downstairs waiting… Make it quick."

"Gotcha," Ms. Gonzales said back to the officer and then turned her attention to Myyah. "Come here, Myyah. Out in the hallway for a second."

"Why she gotta go out there?"

"Ma'am. I just need to have a word with her in private…if you don't mind, ok?"

"Ok…Fine…"

Myyah cautiously walked over to Ms. Gonzales. Evelyn's eyes turned to curious slits as she lightly tapped her right foot against the ground. "Whatever, I'mma get her straight when this Spanish bitch leaves," she whispered under her breath.

Ms. Gonzales pulled the girl away from the door and walked her some feet down to be out of sight and sound from the potentially nosey grandmother. The social worker leaned down to give the obviously nervous and concerned girl eye contact. It was her way of trying to ensure she was going be looking out for her.

"Listen to me, ok?" Ms. Gonzales looked around. "I'm gonna try to get you out of here ASAP. Hopefully, I'm gonna go talk to your other grandma and then go to court to see what we can do. We just gotta unfortunately follow the law." Ms. Gonzales tried her best to explain in such a simple way the complex reason as to why Myyah had to stay with this evidently trifling other grandmother of hers.

"Ok…" Myyah replied

"But, in the meantime, please, if anything bad happens to you. If your grandmother touches you. Hits you. Curses at you. Says mean things to you. Please, when the other social worker lady comes, you need to tell her everything. I already know you shouldn't be here, so I am gonna tell the other social worker lady what's going on, ok?"

"Ok…"

"Don't be afraid. Everything is gonna be alright. Just pray to God every night."

Myyah heard that before, and despite being six, she found herself leaning towards being an agnostic. Was God really there, listening to her pleas and cries? she wondered.

"Also, if anyone else tried to hurt you or do bad things to you, please say something. Do you know how to call 9-11?"

"Yes…"

"Ok then. Well. You're gonna go back to school tomorrow, so also let your teachers and principals know if something happens to you.

But again, when the other lady comes to talk to you, tell her everything that happened to you, ok?"

"Ok…"

Ms. Gonzales smiled, leaned and hugged the girl. "Ayyy, pobrecita…" (poor child).

The social worker stood up and escorted the girl back into the living room of Evelyn's apartment. "Alright, Evelyn. I just had to have a little pep talk with Ms. Myyah here. She's all yours now."

Evelyn fake smiled. "Alrighty now! We gon have some fun while you over here!" Evelyn exclaimed.

"Yeah, have some fun Myyah…and remember what I told you."

"Ok, I will." Myyah's doe eyes widened; full fear and anxiety coming from innocent pupils shot the social worker's conscience. Fucckk, Ms. Gonzales thought to herself.

"You all have a good night!" Ms. Gonzales once again ran a nervous grin across her face and made her way out of the living room and out of the building.

Once she made back into the officer's squad car, she glanced at the unsympathetic officer. "Poor child," she exhaled and shook her head.

"Yeah, well. Can't save everybody. Anyways, let's get the hell up out of here. I am not trying to do a single extra hour of OT tonight."

The oblivious, emotionally numb officer and the heart-wrenched social worker sped off down the street and into the growing dark night.

Chapter Thirty-Two

Myyah stood at the door, frozen. She couldn't move.

"Girl, come over here! Why you just standing there like that? Evelyn growled as she sat on the couch. She leaned her portly self towards her cluttered coffee table and snatched up her pack of cigs. She pulled out a square, slapped it in her mouth and lit it up. A rerun of Good Times lowly blared in the backdrop. From a distance, Quimani and Zy'meer could be heard playing all the way in the back in their room. Low, deep, and heavy bass rumbled from Donterio's room.

Evelyn too was a section 8 recipient. After the infamous Cabrini Green high rises were shut down back in the early 2000s, she moved to the South Shore neighborhood into a three bedroom, two bath rundown apartment. The 52-year-old grandmother was currently unemployed as well. Well, in actuality, she never held a real job in her life. For a brief moment she worked as a school security guard in her mid-30s, but that job only lasted for a good six months after she was fired for getting into an altercation with a parent. Aside from Donterio, her only son who was also the youngest, and Fredquisha, Evelyn had two other daughters. Shantasha, 29, lived all the way out in Rockford with her boyfriend. Her other daughter, Jazmine, 20, lived down in Carbondale, a college town about a good four hours south of Chicago. Jazmine was the only child of Evelyn's who seemed to be starkly different from the rest. She was currently working on her bachelor's degree in hospitality management, and after graduation, she planned on getting as far away from her family.

Myyah slowly and cautiously walked into the somewhat dark and now smoky living room. But rather than get in close proximity to her grandma, she stood off to the side near the couch and remained silent and motionless.

"Come on over here and sit down. We need to talk. I barely get a chance to see my other grandbaby…," Evelyn sneered as she took a long drag from the cigarette.

Myyah, with her hands behind her back, took small steps towards the unfamiliar woman and stood there, not even able to look the

woman in her eyes. Her gaze was lowered. Her facial expression reeked of depression and frustration.

"Ahhh, girl. Don't be afraid of me. I know you been through a lot dealing with your crazy ass mama. Come on over here and let me talk to you for a second, baby…Don't be afraid of me," Evelyn smiled, blowing a steady stream of smoking from her nostrils.

Myyah sat down on an adjacent couch and held her arms as she watched the rerun of Good Times.

"So, tell me what's been going on? Your mother been putting your hands on you?"

Myyah glanced over at Evelyn and didn't respond. She kept quiet. She didn't know if this was some sort of trap question the woman was throwing at her to inevitably report back to Fredquisha what she confessed. Baby girl slowly shook her head no. She had to lie so she wouldn't dig herself deeper into another situation.

Evelyn smirked and didn't say anything. She took another puff from her cigarette and then whistled out a choo choo of smoke in another direction so the fumes wouldn't irritate the obviously scared granddaughter.

"Myyah, baby girl, I know the truth. I know what your mama been doing to you. I always told her she need to stop putting her hands on you and treating you all foul and what not. Don't be scared, baby girl. I tried to help so many times but your mama told me to back off."

Myyah was still quiet. Evelyn got up from her spot on the couch and walked over to her entertainment center. Despite living in a cruddy apartment building, Evelyn had some pretty high tech stuff adorning her living room. A massive 60-inch flatscreen TV sat off on the front wall of the living room. Two big bookshelves were on each side, both containing an array of DVDs and VHS tapes.

"You like movies? I got all types of cartoons!"

"Yeah, I do…" Myyah finally spoke.

"You know, remember that time your other grandma gave you Princess And the Frog? And then she took it away?"

Myyah's eyes widened in slight surprise. Suddenly her disposition changed a bit. "Yeah!"

Evelyn grinned and pulled out a copy of the DVD. "I had always been meaning to give you this for your birthday, but your mama told me no and that you didn't deserve it."

"For real?"

"Yeah! You wanna watch it?"

Bashful she now was, Myyah held her hands up to her face. She slowly nodded her head up and down, "Yeah," she mumbled. Her eyes reeked of meek innocence. Evelyn was playing her cards right. She knew the exact triggers to pull with the girl.

“Ok, well, before we watch the movie, did your other granny feed you?”

“We had somethin’ to eat earlier. I had a peanut butter and jelly sandwich…”

“Oh, chile, you probably still hungry!”

Myyah nodded her head and her cute, bubbly eyes broadened. “Yeah.”

Evelyn pulled out her phone from her back pocket and glared at the time. It was nearly 9 PM. “Well, I gotta take you to school in the morning…” She paused for a moment and then looked up at the ceiling as if she was contemplating on a hard decision. “But…I’ll order you some food from Italian Fiesta. We can get a large pepperoni and sausage pizza. You like pizza?”

Myyah quickly nodded in agreement. She was becoming more and more elated at her grandmother’s plans despite the fact that just moments ago she felt super-uncomfortable around the woman.

“I bet you your mama don’t let you eat pizza, huh?”

“No, she doesn’t. She say I’m too young to eat pizza. She let Quimani and Zy’meer eat all the food.”

“Well, that ain’t gonna happen in my house…You can eat all the food you wanna eat. I got some ice cream in the freezer too. All kinds. Chocolate. Strawberry. Vanilla. I can make you a sundae and we can sit up and watch the movie! I even bought you some new clothes for school and what not! I know school is almost over but I can’t have my grandbaby lookin’ all rough and shit out here.”

Earlier that day, in preparation for Myyah’s arrival, Evelyn went out and bought the girl a few outfits from Marshall’s up in South Loop. Then she headed over to a Jewel-Osco not too far away from her apartment. She bought a smorgasbord of groceries to load up her fridge, freezer, and cabinets with an arrangement of desserts, snacks, chips, cereals, etc.

“Really?!?” Myyah exclaimed and smiled.

“See, there you go! I knew I could make you smile.” Evelyn exhaled, “I just wish your mama wasn’t so trifling. Anyways, I’m gonna pop this movie in. Make yourself comfortable. I’m gonna order this pizza too, ok?”

“Ok…”

“And don’t be afraid to call me NaNa. You don’t have to call me granny. Just don’t call me by my first name, ok love? That’s not respectful to call your elders by your first name.”

“I know, it just that Fredquisha make me call her by her first name.”

“Oh, I know. And that ain’t right. That’s your mama. I swear I don’t know what I did with that no good daughter of mines…” Evelyn

rolled her eyes and proceeded to dial up Italian Fiesta which was a local pizza parlor not too far away from her apartment.

As the movie began to play and Myyah made herself more and more comfortable in the apartment, she began to tune out her surroundings and get lost in her favorite animated film. Some minutes passed and once Evelyn got off the phone with the pizza restaurant, she sauntered over to the couch where Myyah was sitting and sat next to her. She looked down at her and lightly tugged her to sit closer to her. Myyah was nervous at first. It was the first time ever she'd been that closely snuggled up against the woman.

Evelyn began to run her hands through Myyah's hair and smirked, "Girl, you so beautiful. You look just like your daddy. You saw him at the dance the other night?"

"Yeah!"

"You had fun?"

"Yup…We got into a car accident and almost didn't make it, but we was still able to go."

"That's good! I'm so happy for you. You gotta have yo daddy in yo life…Anyways, so tell me, Myyah. Your mama been hitting you and calling you names?"

Myyah turned her face and gawked up at NaNa. "Yeah," she tearfully confessed.

"That's so bad. She call you names too?"

"Yes…"

"Like what kind of names?"

"Can I say them, NaNa?"

"Yeah, tell me the names…"

"She call me a hoe, bitch, slut. NaNa, what's a slut?"

"That's a bad word! She said all that to you?"

"Yes…"

"How does it make you feel? Are you scared?"

Myyah didn't respond. She just held her face. Her eyes watered. "It make me feel sad. I think sometimes she might try to kill me." Myyah began to sniffle and stutter, "I-I-I do-don't wanna die. I'm afraid to-to die…"

"Oh, poor baby! You not gonna die! Don't cry!"

Myyah by this point couldn't help it. Her face flooded with salty tears of grief and pain. Her cheeks soaked and glistened well enough to let Evelyn know just the amount of turmoil the girl had gone through living with her mother.

While the turbulent, young life experience shone through the eruption of tears running down Myyah's face, Evelyn was a tad unfazed. She knew exactly what she was doing. Psychology. Mending and twisting the girl's young, naïve mind to extract something from

her necessary to advance an agenda she had all along.

"Awww, poor baby! It's gonna be alright," Evelyn consoled as she buried the girl in her chest and rubbed her back. "Shhh, shhh, shhh, come on now. I don't want you to miss the movie, ok?" Evelyn stated with softness defining her plea to the emotionally, physically and even spiritually battered girl.

"Ok-k-k," Myyah stammered, wiping her reddened watery eyes. She sniffled. Baby girl threw her gaze back onto the television. She allowed herself to get lost in the Disney fantasy, taking her mind off from the dismal, abusive reality that NaNa reminded her of on purpose.

Checkmate. Evelyn smiled as she kept consoling the girl. "Let me go get you some water, ok? Or do you want a pop? I got some scrawberry soda in the fridge. You want a can?"

"Yeah…"

"Ok, chile. Keep watching your movie. Let me go get your pop." Evelyn plopped herself up from the couch and meandered deep into her kitchen. She flicked on the light switch and walked over to the fridge. Before she opened it though, she gawked at her apartment lease renewal notice she had on the fridge's door being held up with some plumber's business card magnet. For months NaNa had been contemplating whether or not she wanted to move, but she didn't quite have the finances to go to the place she truly desired – a renovated high rise over in Hyde Park.

Some months ago Evelyn found out through her section 8 caseworker down at the Chicago Housing Authority that long-time voucher holders were going to get first dibs at moving into newly constructed mixed-income high rises popping up all over Hyde Park and parts of Bronzeville. This new building being built right off the Lake was speaking life into Evelyn. It was slated to be one of the largest luxury high rises on the South Side. In Chicago, the city council had passed a law some years ago that made it mandatory for multi-unit housing developers to offer a certain percentage of building units to low-income families who qualified for housing assistance. Evelyn was one of those who qualified. She was elated to find out that just in a few months the new luxury high-rise was slated to open and she wanted a four bedroom all to herself. The only drawback was that her current voucher would only cover up to 80% of the rent. This four bedroom apartment she wanted was $3,000, which meant she'd need to come up with an additional $600 plus the costs of utilities to afford the apartment. Right now Evelyn was paying no more than $200 for everything. However, now that she had some sort of 'temporary' custody over Myyah, deep down something was telling her she could finesse both her daughter and DCFS to make the custody permanent. If

that happened Evelyn would get her claws onto Myyah's SSI and any future child support payments coming from Austin.

Although Evelyn and Fredquisha had some semblance of a "normal" mother-daughter relationship, deep down Evelyn always had some sort of weird envy of her daughter. For starters, she felt Fredquisha wasted her good looks and body on no good dope dealers who obviously didn't amount to shit. In Evelyn's mind, Fredquisha could've been someone…A prominent hairstylist. Owner of a nail salon. Maybe even a model. But she just chased dope dealer dick and got nothing in return. She just devolved into having a bad body, inconsistent under-the-table cash from her baby daddies, and a roach-infested apartment. Although Evelyn herself made somewhat of the same mistakes when it came to her choice in men when she was younger, mama always figured she'd set a good enough example for her daughters so they wouldn't go down the same road. Her two other daughters seemed to kind of get it, but not Fredquisha. MooMoo had always kind of been the rebellious one, but Evelyn never said or did anything. She just went along with the program because, at the end of the day, she had her own life to live. Nevertheless, Evelyn also thought her daughter was a tad reckless and couldn't manage her ratchetness. The fight Fredquisha had with her sons set Evelyn off even more into thinking that Fredquisha needed to get her ratchetry under control, especially now that that pregnancy bombshell was dropped on everyone. Evelyn knew it was just a matter of time before Paulette would go run her mouth and possibly create more drama for everyone. So, rather than be a bystander and possibly lose the opportunity to get her hands on Myyah, 'NaNa' now had to put in that work to make sure granddaughter was 'safe and secure'. Make sure them gubment funds were safe and secure…

Evelyn opened the fridge, grabbed two cans of strawberry soda and made her way back into the living room. Myyah was completely enraptured by the movie. "The pizza should be here in the next twenty minutes or so," Evelyn chimed in a soft voice so she wouldn't interrupt the girl's attention towards the cartoon.

"Ok, NaNa," baby girl obliviously responded.

Evelyn sneered. Cha-ching! Payday was coming.

Evelyn assumed at any moment a caseworker was going to swing by and interview Myyah, Quimani and Zy'meer. She didn't give a fuck about the two boys, truth be told. Hell, if anything she felt they needed to go stay with their fathers or their other grandmothers. The person who she was going to work hard on was Myyah. And the crazy thing was, she didn't need to coach the girl to lie. What she planned on doing was making baby girl comfortable and free enough to confess everything. EVERYTHING. And Evelyn was going to buttress

up her testimony with her own. Throw her own daughter under the bus…

Chapter Thirty-Three

"That was such a cute movie! Tomorrow we can go to Wal-Mart and see if we can buy some more DVDs. You wanna do that after school tomorrow?"

"Yes, NaNa," Myyah slowly responded. Sleepiness took over her body. With the pizza, soda and ice cream swimming in her tiny stomach, she was ready to lay down and rest. Such a long, depressing day, but at least it ended on a somewhat good note for baby girl.

"Ohh, girl, you sleepy I can tell. Come on. Let's go get you situated in ya bed. You're gonna be sleeping in the room with me. I got you a little air mattress in the corner for now, but once we get situated I'mma get you a room all to yourself," Evelyn smiled as she picked the girl up from the couch and led her down the hallway.

Myyah wiped her sleepy eyes and mumbled, "Ok."

Once inside the bedroom, Evelyn helped baby girl change into some pajamas she bought for her as well. Although she had a twin-sized air mattress situated in the corner of the bed near the radiator, Evelyn made sure the air mattress was super-comfortable. NaNa even bought new blankets and some pillows for grandbaby.

Once Evelyn got the young girl into her sleep outfit, she laid her down onto the air mattress and tucked her in. Unfortunately, baby girl was too sleepy and exhausted to fully realize just the depth of the nastiness of NaNa's room. Clothes were everywhere. The room reeked of cigarettes, ass, and beer mixed in NaNa's favorite knock-off Chanel No.5 Perfume.

Like her daughter, Evelyn had a roach problem inside of her apartment, but the vermin issue wasn't as disgustingly horrid compared to Fredquisha's situation just days ago. Evelyn was a tad bit more proactive though in trying to rid the apartment of roaches. The critter problem was also another reason why she was so hell bent on trying to get out and move into a subsidized luxury unit up in Hyde Park. She knew living with white folks and boujee niggas would upgrade her living situation and roaches, rats nor mice wouldn't be a part of it either.

"Aiiight girl, you fast asleep. Time for NaNa to get some

muhfuckin' z's too! Gotta wake my ass up early to drive you to that school." Evelyn meandered her way over to her bed. She slipped out of her flip-flops and picked up a bonnet cap sitting on her dresser. Once she got her hair tucked under the bonnet, she took her shirt off. Her big, hanging titties luckily were netted with a bra. She plopped herself in the bed and within seconds began to snore.

~

Five roach goons crawled out of the radiator next to deeply sleeping Myyah. The roach clique was on a 3 AM hunt for some food they sensed some moments ago. They were amped, ready to hit a lick so they could come up in the muhfuckin' vicious streets of pest city. One of them, the obvious leader of the gang, spotted an unknown stranger sleeping on his turf. She was a pretty, petite brown skin girl who from a million miles away smelled of spicy pepperoni grease.

Triple OG Chief of the roach gang waved his antennas in the direction of Myyah, letting his crew know they spotted their unaware, young victim. The five roaches then scurried closer to Myyah. They crawled on her limbs and slowly made their way up her torso and chest. Myyah didn't flinch at all. The roaches trekked closer and closer to her face. Once they landed on her neck, they scratched and sniffed at the pizza grease spots stained under her chin and upper neck.

Myyah continued to sleep, unaware that the roaches were literally camping out on her face and upper body. Triple OG Chief roach grew angered. This young bitch didn't have any food. He looked to his side and saw another one of his partners too was visibly upset. Four of the roaches looked at each other, giving themselves the "Fuck It" look. So, they took off, but Triple OG Chief roach was mad. This victim he assumed was holding something valuable and the lil hoe didn't have anything on her. What a waste of time and energy. So, without hesitation Triple OG Chief roach bit into the girl's left cheekbone.

"AHHH! AHHHHHH!" Suddenly Myyah woke up and scratched hard at her face. Triple OG Chief roach scampered away and off into the room's deep darkness to catch up with the rest of his team. Maybe they needed to go onto a larger excursion in the apartment and find the real source of the pizza grease – the box of leftovers still sitting on the coffee table in the living room.

"NaNa! NaNa!" Myyah stormed out of the air mattress and lunged towards the side of the bed where Evelyn was sleeping on; her snores though amplified the entire room not allowing Myyah's fearful pleas enter her ears.

"Ahhhh! NaNa!" Myyah screamed again hoping by now her amplified cry would wake the grandmother up.

Evelyn slowly opened her eyes and choked a bit on her tongue. NaNa had severe sleep apnea and truth be told should've been sleeping with her CPAP mask on her face. "What, girl?" Evelyn lowly growled, somewhat annoyed baby girl had awakened her out of her deep, dreamy sleep.

"A roach bit me on my face!" Myyah cried as she fervently wiped her cheekbone. She could feel slight stinging irritation spread across her face.

Evelyn smacked her teeth. "Girl, you just probably had a nightmare. Ain't no damn roaches gon bite you on your face." NaNa yawned and wiped slobber from the corners of her mouth. Her mouth a bit parched from the snoring and the two cigs she smoked after she got done eating her pizza and ice cream with baby girl.

Myyah knew for sure though that wasn't a nightmare. The roach bite was definitely a reality, and as she continued to scratch her face, tears welled in her eyes.

Evelyn huffed and yawned again. "Come on and get in the bed with me. I knew I should've never had you sleep by yourself anyways…" NaNa pulled back the blanket showering her plump body and invited the girl to sleep next to her.

Myyah had all-out reluctance and fear racing through her body. Baby girl stood there for a moment or two before she gave in and crawled into the bed and snuggled herself next to Evelyn. However, she kept scratching her face hoping the stinging would subside. As a few minutes passed and surely the pain dithered away. Myyah closed her eyes once more and fell asleep.

Chapter Thirty-Four

BEEP! BEEP! BEEP! BEEP!

Evelyn's alarm clock jolted her and Myyah out of sleep. It was 6 AM and Myyah needed to be to school in less than an hour and a half. NaNa slowly opened her eyes and yawned. She wiped the crust out of her eyes and patted her bonnet. "Damn, I ain't even get good sleep," Evelyn complained as she licked the corners of her mouth with her dry tongue.

Myyah slowly slid out of the bed and clasped her face. "NaNa, my face is still hurting! I'm telling you a roach bit me last night!" the girl sluggishly complained. Intense drowsiness bogged her body. Still feeling extremely exhausted from yesterday all she could focus now on was the insect bite on her face.

"Here, let me see what you talkin' 'bout 'cuz I just cain't believe a damn roach bit you on yo face. Girl, I grew up in the projects and lived with roaches all my life. Roaches don't bite, girl" Evelyn grabbed Myyah's face and examined it. She did see a visible red spot protruding from her cheek but figured it wasn't that much of a big deal at all.

"Well, it still itchin'?" Evelyn asked.

"Yeah, it kind of stings!" Myyah cried.

"Well, come on, let's go and put some ointment on it so it'll go away. You still gotta go to school today."

"Ok, NaNa…" Once Evelyn got out of the bed she led the still sluggish girl to the bathroom. "My stomach also hurt too, NaNa. I don't feel good…"

Evelyn turned around and looked down at baby girl. Beads of sweat began to race down Myyah's pale face. "Damn, you gotta throw up or somethin'?"

"Ye-yeah," Myyah stammered as she grabbed her stomach and leaned over a bit.

"Come on, let's go to the bathroom then so you can use the potty. You can't be throwing up on my floor and stuff."

"Ok," Myyah replied, but she grew increasingly confused. The room was spinning and she felt hazy more than ever. This wasn't just sluggishness still swamping the girl. Something else was going on.

They made it inside the bathroom inside Evelyn's room. NaNa grabbed some itch cream from her medicine cabinet and rubbed a dab into Myyah's sore cheek.

Suddenly, without hesitation, vomit erupted from Myyah's mouth, chunks landed all over Evelyn and the floor.

“GOD DAMN!” Evelyn barked as she stood back a bit and watched the girl throw up food she apparently still had marinating in the acidic pits of her tiny stomach. “Girl! You alright?”

“No…I feel sick, NaNa. Like really sick…”

“Ahhh, shit. I knew we should’ve never got you that pizza. Ate all that pizza and ice cream last night. That shit give me heartburn. Probably why I didn’t sleep good last night either,” Evelyn continued to complain. “DONTERIO! DONTERIO!”

“Whhhhhhaaaaat?!?!” Her son’s voice could be faintly heard echoing from his room.

“GO GRAB ME SOME PAPERTOWELS FROM THE KITCHEN AND SOME FABULOSO! MYYAH DONE THREW UP ALL OVER THE PLACE! HURRY UP!”

Donterio’s door could be heard swinging open. Evelyn sat Myyah down on the toilet and used one of her washcloths to wipe her face. By this point, Myyah was extremely dizzy and more nauseated than ever. Her hair was damp from intense sweating. Her face clammy. Her eyes sunken.

Donterio entered the room. He looked around before he noticed his mother hovering over Myyah in the bathroom. “Oh, there you are… What happened?”

“I’on know! She just started throwin’ up all over the place!” Evelyn continued to examine her woozy-looking granddaughter as she swayed side to side sitting on the toilet.

“Damn, she look fucked up. You smoked some green around her or some shit?” Donterio jokingly asked.

“Boy, shut the fuck up and get the fuck out of my room. I need to get her cleaned up and take her to school. She got tests and shit.”

Donterio smacked his teeth. “Anyways, I’m finna head out. I got a job interview…”

“Good! ‘Cuz you gon need a job soon so you can get the hell up outta my house wit cho sorry behind. Just like yo damn daddy. Ain’t worth a damn!”

Donterio rolled his eyes and quickly departed the room.

Evelyn took the paper towel her son brought to her from the kitchen and doused it in Fabuloso. She began to wipe up the vomit from the ceramic tile floor as Myyah still sat on the toilet quiet and solemn like a Zen Buddhist monk meditating.

“Damn, girl…I can’t believe you threw up all over my damn flo like this! Wheww, chile!”

Not bothering to pay attention to the gravely sick girl, Evelyn continued to mop up the vomit into the paper towel. She worked quickly because she knew she needed to get the girl to school ASAP. There was also a real possibility that a social worker from DCFS was

going to swing by later tonight to conduct an interview with Myyah. Evelyn needed Myyah to be in the best spirits, ready to spill all the mothafuckin' beans about her mother.

With her eyes barely open, Myyah continued to gaze around the bathroom. Everything was spinning faster and faster as if she was on a Six Flags roller coaster. Her breathing became shallow. Her blood pressure began a steady decline as her heart beat became slower and lighter.

Evelyn plopped herself up from the ground and threw away the vomit-riddled paper towel. She then glanced over at Myyah. "Let me give you some stomach medicine."

Myyah didn't respond. Her limp, tired body continued to sway in chaotic directions. All of sudden she lost control over her senses and blacked out. She collapsed to the floor and began to violently convulse, thick white foam erupted from her mouth.

"Myyah! MYYAH! WHAT'S WRONG?!?!?" Evelyn lunged down at the girl's tremoring body. She grabbed her and picked her up. She then barged back into her room and laid her on the bed as her tremoring ceased. Her body made one last tick, and her eyes opened. Darkness overcame the girl; a thick pall of numbing motionless covered her body.

"DONTERIO! DONTERIO! GET IN HERE!"

"WHAT?!? I GOTTA GO!" he screamed back, not realizing that now his mother's yell was more of a cry.

Donterio sauntered into the room with a scowl of annoyance on his face.

"What, mama!?!? Shit, I gotta go—"

Evelyn clasped her mouth! "Somethin' ain't' right with her! I think she had a seizure! CALL 9-11!"

"What happened!?!?" Donterio looked over at Myyah.

"I DON'T KNOW! SHE JUST FELL OFF THE DAMN TOILET AND STARTED HAVIN' A SEIZURE!"

"FUCK!" Donterio quickly whipped out his iPhone and dialed 9-11. Quimani and

Zy'meer, now awake, entered the room and gawked over to Myyah's motionless body and their frantic grandmother. "What's goin' on, grandma?" Zy'meer inquired.

"YOUR SISTER IS SICK! SHE AIN'T MOVING!"

Evelyn hovered over the girl and placed her head over the girl's chest. No heartbeat could be heard. She then ran her fingers across the girl's neck to feel a pulse. No pulse. She then Myyah wasn't breathing either.

"OH, FUCK! SHE AIN'T BREATHIN' AND HER HEART AIN'T BEATING! I THINK SHE MIGHT BE DEAD!"

“The ambulance should be here in a few minutes they said!” Donterio barked as he lunged towards Myyah to see if he could possibly help her out.

“I know CPR, mama! Move!”

“Please! Do something! HELP HER!”

Donterio began chest compressions on the girl. “Mama, open her mouth and breathe into it!”

“She still got throw up and shit in her mouth!”

“MAMA! PLEASE JUST DO IT! CPR WON’T WORK IF SHE DON’T GET OXYGEN TO HER BRAIN!”

“Fine!” Evelyn leaned over and wiped the girl’s mouth with a shirt she picked up from the floor. She reluctantly placed her lips over the girl’s mouth and lightly breathed in as Donterio kept pushing down on the girl’s chest.

“MOVE, MAMA! YOU AIN’T DOIN’ IT RIGHT!” Donterio commanded as he pushed his mother out of the way. “JUST GO CHECK DOWNSTAIRS TO SEE IF THE AMBULANCE IS HERE! QUIMANI AND ZY’MEER! GO WITH GRANDMA! NOW!”

Evelyn along with her grandsons stormed the room and made their way downstairs.

“Fuck, fuck, fuck,” Donterio cried as he couldn’t feel a heartbeat come back yet nor could he feel Myyah’s breathing restart.

“Please, don’t die on me, girl! PLEASE!”

Chapter Thirty-Five

Wednesday Morning…11:43 AM.

Buzz. Buzz. Buzz. “Ughhh, this dude just doesn’t get it.” Katina felt her phone buzzing in her back pocket. She already had an inkling it was Deontae once again sending her a text message from a different phone.

Since their little “encounter” earlier this week, it was obvious by the barrage of text messages he kept blasting her with that he wasn’t over it. He’d be damned if Katina was just going to up and leave. This wasn’t even just about the pussy. This was all about his control over her and his need for her to stabilize his lifestyle. Without her, everything around him would begin to crumble.

Katina though, strong more than ever, simply ignored his “idle” threats. But the more he persisted, the more she grew concerned that Deontae was really going to make good on his threats. What that threat would look like? Well, Katina didn’t know.

But she had something for his ass though…

With their encounter coupled with the stream of threatening text messages, the first thing she was planning on doing was going down to the police station to file a temporary restraining order against him. Then she was going to go make sure her gun card was still up to date with the City of Chicago. She no longer trusted this fuck nigga since every day he was showing his true colors of desperation and insecurity. If he tried it with her on that level, she was ready to kill him if necessary.

Katina whipped out her phone, glanced down and saw the message from the blocked number…

“You betta get yo mind right before I do…” the text message read. The ICU nurse immediately deleted it and shook her head. She took a deep breath and rolled her eyes.

“Girl, you alright? You looked stressed? Margaret, another nurse in the ICU asked once she sensed Katina looked a bit shook. “Yeah, I’m cool. Just dealing with a no good ass nigga,” she fake smiled and laughed. Deep down, she was a tad fearful but ready to defend herself at all cost if Deontae truly tried to put his hands on her or pull some

other crazy shit. She had to. By any means necessary now was she going to defend herself and her kids. Crazy how niggas can quickly lose their cool even just after days of a breakup. Literally, days…It wasn't even a full week since Katina left her apartment she shared with the sorry ass nigga.

Katina waltzed over to Margaret. She yawned, "Girl, I'm so ready to leave. These overnights are really starting to get to me…"

"Hell, who you tellin? Shit, I just put in an application down at Mercy Medical in Aurora. I need me a regular 9-5 now. These overnights are killing my sex life and I'm gaining weight," Margarete complained.

"Hey, Katina and Margaret, go and get a room ready. We have a new patient coming in in the next hour or so!" Ophelia, the chief pediatric nurse, yelled from the central nurse's station. From the stern and grave tone of the manager's voice, Katina and Margaret quickly killed their conversation and found the closest available room to prepare for a new patient. Once the two women prepared a bed, EKG machine and other relevant ICU room equipment, they sauntered back out of the room and prepared for the arrival of the patient.

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Fifteen quick minutes transpired inside the cold and bright ICU floor… A long hospital bed escorted by two doctors and a nurse made its way down one of the corridors in the pediatric ICU unit. One of the doctors – a tall, lanky, baldheaded white man – turned his attention towards Ophelia sitting at the nurse's station and asked, "Do you all have the room set up for patient Myyah Watkins?"

"Yessir, Room 809…What are her vitals?" Ophelia asked as she got up from the nurse's station and escorted Myyah and the doctors towards the room.

"She's stable now. BP a tad low. 89/65. Heart rate around 75. She was code blue earlier, but the paramedics were able to get her heart started again. We are going to need to run some CT scans on her. Blood tests haven't come back yet."

"What happened?" Ophelia asked as they entered the room.

"Don't know. Grandmother said she may have gotten food poisoning, but the girl complained earlier about being bitten by a bug."

Ophelia screwed her face up, "What kind of bug?"

"A roach possibly…"

"Roaches bite?"

"Ehhh, apparently. But I don't know. I'm just thinking it's probably a really bad case of E. coli poisoning," the emergency room physician

indicated. Guess he couldn't imagine that a bug would actually inflict this type of health disaster on the young girl, let alone something as simple as a common roach. "But I went ahead and contacted an infectious disease specialist and the chief neurologist to look into the case. Her brain activity is showing possible damage…"

"Ok," Ophelia responded. "Let me go get two of my other nurses to help out with the transition."

"Ok, perfect," the lead doctor responded.

Ophelia quickly stepped out of the room and gawked back at the nurse's station. "Hey, Katina, I'm assigning you this patient. Let's get her set up. Neurology and Infectious Disease are coming down at any moment to figure out what's going on…"

Katina got up from her seat at one of the other nurse's stations and made her way over to the room. "I can take it from here," Katina stated as she stepped deeper into the room and quickly began to help the nurse from the emergency room hook up additional equipment to Myyah to monitor her obviously frail condition.

Tina tightened her lips and shook her head. "Wow, she's such a pretty little girl..."

"Yeah, she's so adorable, hopefully, she'll be able to pull out of this one, but I don't know, things aren't looking good," the portly old white nurse murmured as she hooked up an additional breathing apparatus to Myyah's mouth.

With so many tubes running in and out of Myyah's body you would've thought she was a part of some elaborate science experiment. But this wasn't an experiment. This was a dark reality the girl succumbed to and here she was now fighting for her young life.

Once Katina observed the girl's vitals, she examined the IV bag running saline and medication into the Myyah's skinny brown arm.

"Poor little girl," Katina huffed. Despite being a mother of two, as a nurse, Katina saw so many children die over and over again the pediatric ICU. Incessant observation of seeing young children pass away made Katina very immune to the looming possibility of Myyah's death. Baby girl would just be another unfortunate victim of some tragic circumstance that cut her life too soon. Nonetheless, Katina had no time to enrapture her feelings into Myyah. Her job was to do everything in her power to make sure her vitals were stable enough for the doctors to perform their routine tests and diagnostics and then proceed with any type of medical procedure deemed necessary. But there was also the unfortunate possibility of consulting immediate family to make an end-of-life decision. Everyday ritual at the Downtown Children's hospital. Everyday ritual for Katina.

Nurse Katina made her way out of the room and back over to the nurse's station. She sat down next to Margaret and immediately began

processing Myyah's intake paperwork for the next round of doctors to look at once they made their way to her room. "Ughh, this would be the way to end my day," Katina grumbled, shaking her head.

Chapter Thirty-Six

Another usual Wednesday morning for Fredquisha. Not a damn thing was really on her agenda other than the anticipation and worry of having to deal with DCFS. By this point though she was so sure of herself that nothing would come of their investigation and eventually her kids would return to their "new" home. Still doing her best to keep the house as tidy as possible, Fredquisha carefully paced the apartment living room making sure her shit was still intact.

"Fuck!" Fredquisha growled once her eyes saw a roach scramble from underneath the couch. "Ughhh, I knew those muhfuckas weren't completely gone yet! I just knew it!"

MooMoo shook her head and huffed. She whipped out her phone and was just about to dial Mr. Garrison…now her somewhat sugar daddy. But just as she was about hit dial on the phone and curse the man out for getting his workers to do a piss poor job with the extermination, Fredquisha was suddenly distracted by three loud thuds on her door.

BOOM! BOOM! BOOM!

MooMoo threw her attention towards the door. She wasn't expecting any company and no one buzzed her doorbell from outside the building. Had to be either a neighbor, Glen or Mr. Garrison. And if it was Mr. Garrison she was about to give him a mouth full in regards to the roach she just saw moments ago. She stormed towards her front door and peeped out door's peephole. "Oh, fucking Deontae!"

A relieved MooMoo quickly unlocked her door. "Boy, whatchu want?!? I was gonna hit you up later tonight for some dro! You must've been reading my mind!"

Deontae nervously chuckled as he strolled right into the apartment without even allowing MooMoo to welcome him in.

"Damn, girl! This shit look different than a muhfucka! You got this place cleaned the fuck up!"

"Yeah…I gotta get a clean and shit 'cuz I got some peoples coming over later," MooMoo replied, scrunching her face up. She quickly noticed how dressed down Deontae was. Any other day Deontae would've been dressed to the nine, looking like the typically paid dope

boy he claimed to be, but this morning he was looking a bit shaggy.

"So, umm, what's wrong? Wassup?" MooMoo asked.

"Man, I know this gon sound weird as shit, but I need a place to crash," Deontae explained as he sat down on the couch, edgy as shit.

MooMoo screwed her face up even more. Was this nigga really being serious right now? she wondered. "What the fuck you mean you need a place to stay?"

Deontae smacked his teeth and lowered his gaze. His body language emitted shame for what he was about to say. "Man, my baby moms Tina kicked me out. The apartment in her name and the landlord said I gotta go since my name ain't on the lease. I ain't got nowhere else to say 'cuz my mama'nem crib already packed to the brim."

"Damn, none of your homeboys can't even let you stay with them?"

"Nah, I already asked. None of they bitches wanna let me stay and shit."

"And you ain't got no cousins and what not you can stay with?"

Deontae smacked his teeth once more, "Nah, sis."

"So….." Fredquisha mumbled, tapping her foot against the floor, hands on her waist. "What you sayin' is you wanna stay with me?"

"I mean…I can't think of anyone else. Besides, I mean, I figure since we cool and all, and we kick it from time to time and shit, you know, hey," Deontae nervously grinned. Essentially what he was alluding to was the fact that since he'd already tagged the pussy several times, MooMoo shouldn't really have any qualms letting him stay.

"Boy, I got my kids livin' with me and then I got this social worker lady supposed to be comin' over my place at any moment now and shit. I don't know, Deontae. Besides, I'm kinda seein' someone right now…" She was lying about seeing someone. Trel had ghosted her ass.

"Fuck…." Deontae shook his head. "Shit, man, bro. Look, I just need like a week or two until I can get my shit together. I had to spend a night in my car and shit."

"Damn, for real? I mean…" MooMoo thought about it for a second. She could see Deontae was looking stressed the fuck out. Truth be told, Deontae, if he wasn't such a sheisty character, had a chance of being with MooMoo for the long-term. But to MooMoo, Deontae was nothing more than her source of weed, pills and occasional dick.

"Fine. A week. But you gon have to run me some cash and weed…"

Deontae hopped up from the couch and smiled. "Damn, I got you. I swear…"

Fredquisha held out and opened her right hand. She rolled her

neck and didn't say a word. But the look she gave Deontae let him instantly know he had to put down a deposit.

"Oh, you think I'm tweakin'. I got you, sis," he replied as he whipped out his wallet and handed Fredquisha a couple of twenties.

She quickly counted the money. $150. "Ok, and the weed?"

"It's downstairs in the car…"

"Ok, don't fuck with me. My head is already spinning 'cuz I ain't smoke some good ass weed in days. Anyways, I'm cleaning up my apartment. You can chill out if you want…"

"Oh, so you don't want wanna have a lil fun or some shit?" Deontae smiled, grabbing his crotch. "Boy, like I said, I'm seeing someone right now…"

"Man, ya'll ain't married!"

"And?!?! Nigga, once I'm loyal, I'm not sharing this lil pussy with nobody!"

"Lil pussy? Bihhhhh…." Deontae smacked his teeth extra hard this time.

"WHAT YOU SAY?!?!" Fredquisha rolled her neck. She gave Deontae that look that if he uttered one more smart thing she'd instantly renege on her offer to let him stay at her apartment.

"Nothin'. I'm just gonna watch a lil tv then until you get done."

"Good then. And when I'm done, then I'mma need you to run the store and get me some shit for my place. I need some candles, garbage bags, a new broom, and some Windex."

"Damn, you got me doin' shit thought like I'm yo nigga. Can a nigga at least get a taste of that pussy if I'm gon' be helpin' you out and some shit!"

"UGHHHH! Fine! One time! But later. I got real shit to do today!"

Deontae produced a wide Joker grin as he sat back down on the couch. "Ok, I'm game…"

Buzz. Buzz. Buzz. Fredquisha's phone vibrated in her back pocket. She quickly pulled it out and glanced down at the screen. Evelyn was calling her. MooMoo swiped right and answered, "Wassup, ma?"

"Hey, Fredquisha…" Evelyn replied, sounding depressed and filled with angst.

"Damn, why you sound like that? You high or some shit?"

"Fredquisha, you need to get down to Northwestern Memorial ASAP. Myyah is in the ICU. Doctors saying she may not make it."

Fredquisha squeezed her face in shock. Maybe she misheard her mother so she had to have her repeat what she just dropped on her. "Wait, what you say? What are you talkin' about, ma?"

"MooMoo, it's serious. Just bring yo ass down here. The doctors are giving her possibly hours to live."

Fredquisha's disposition suddenly changed. The woman who was

once a hardened ghetto vixen suddenly succumbed to deep grief and sorrow. “WHAT ARE YOU TALKIN’ ABOUT, MA?!? WHAT HAPPENED?!?!”

“Baby, please, don’t do this right now. Just get down here!”

Fredquisha didn’t even bother to continue talking. She instantly hung up the phone and began to cry.

“Yo, damn, what’s going on?” Deontae asked.

“Deontae, take me to Northwestern Children’s Hospital! My baby is dying!”

“What!??! What you talkin’ about?!?”

“PLEASE, JUST GET UP AND TAKE ME TO THE HOSPITAL!”

“Man, that’s where my baby moms work at!?! You must know that bitch too! Ya’ll tryin’ to play games on me or some shit!?!?”

“NO! I DON’T KNOW THAT BITCH! MY MAMA JUST CALLED ME AND TOLD ME MY BABY GIRL IS IN THE HOSPITAL DYING!”

“Mannnn! What the fuck?!?” Deontae jumped from the couch and kept shaking his head. He almost didn’t want to believe Fredquisha. But now with tears streaming down her face and her entire body quivering he had no other choice to believe her.

“Come on, man. Let’s go. What the fuck happened to her?!?”

“I don’t know! My mama just called me and told me she’s in the hospital and she ain’t got long left to live!” With so much unexpected fretfulness and anguish overtaking Fredquisha, she almost collapsed to the floor.

Deontae lunged at his new roommate and grabbed her before she could fall. “Fuckkk! Come on, I got you, sis! Shhh, come on now. Everything is gonna be cool.”

Once Fredquisha got a sense of herself again, she quickly scrambled the living room to grab her purse and keys. She, along with Deontae, then stormed the front door and made their way downstairs. Time was of the essence now. It was so crazy how suddenly Fredquisha found some sense of motherliness and concern for her only daughter. Was it front? No. Fredquisha truly was taken aback and couldn’t fathom the idea of suddenly losing the girl. Then again, maybe it was the hormones from her current pregnancy kicking in, making her over-emotional.

Chapter Thirty-Seven

The moment frantic Fredquisha dashed inside the automatic double doors of Northwestern Children's hospital, she ran straight towards the receptionist's desk. "MY BABY! Myyah Watkins is in here! I NEED TO SEE HERE NOW!" MooMoo cried.

The older white woman, 'Nowalski', polish, as evident by the golden nameplate pinned to her upper right shirt, gawked at Fredquisha and immediately began to type away in her computer. "You said her name was Myyah Watkins?"

"Yes, bitch! Hurry up! MYYAH WATKINS!"

"Ma'am, you don't have to use that type of language, I am trying to help. Please help me spell her name."

"DAMN! M. Y. Y. A. H…LAST NAME WATKINS! Now hurry da fuck up!" Fredquisha once against proceeded to curse the woman who obviously was sincerely trying to help her.

The receptionist could tell just by Fredquisha's flustered body language that she was in distress and so she didn't want to further agitate her. "She's in the Intensive Care Unit. Room 809. Go to the elevators and go to the 8th floor, ma'am!"

MooMoo didn't bother to give the woman a thank you. She just took off running towards the elevators and made her way up to the eighth floor. Once she'd arrived at the ICU, still in full-on manic mode, she quickly searched the long corridor, confused as to which direction where Myyah's room was at. She'd texted and called Evelyn earlier to let her know she was at the hospital but Evelyn wasn't responding. Perhaps NaNa had bad reception. Maybe the phone died. Maybe Myyah was already dead and Evelyn passed the fuck out. Who knows.

MooMoo, still confused and visibly angered, noticed a nurse walking towards her.

"Excuse me, I'm lookin' for my baby girl…Myyah Watkins. She in Room 809. Where is that?!?"

"Are you her mother?" The nurse was Margaret.

"YES!"

"Ok, come with me. Her grandmother is in the room with her right

now talking to one of the doctors…" The two women then began to quickly make their way down the corridor and to Myyah's room. Each step Fredquisha made towards the room, her intense sorrow was matched with the heavy coldness of the ICU wing. Her body shivered and she held herself tightly, hoping she could provide some little warmth to her body. So many regrets ran through her mind. She just knew she should've been gave up custody of Myyah to Mrs. Watkins and perhaps now she wouldn't find herself into this position of having to see her only daughter laid up in the hospital bed on the cusp of death.

The moment Fredquisha entered the room and saw Myyah lying motionless with an overflowing abundance of tubes running throughout every single orifice in her body, she clung her mouth and began to weep. "Ohhhh, my baby girl. Ohhh noooo!" She walked closer to the bed and began to tremble uncontrollably.

Evelyn and Donterio were the only ones in the room with the doctor.

A short, brown tanned man, possibly Indian or Arab, sauntered over to Fredquisha and produced a somewhat, flat smile. A smile that attempted to inject the mother with some sense of hope and consolation.

"Ma'am, I'm Dr. Swati. I'm the chief pediatric neurologist at Northwestern Hospital…"

Fredquisha didn't respond. She just looked the man up and down, her body still quivering in fear. She turned her attention back to Myyah and moved closer to her. The clashing sounds of the EKG machine mixing in with the respirator pumping oxygen into Myyah's small, frail lungs was a second-by-second beating reminder that at any moment Myyah's life would slip away. The angel of death was near…

"Is she gonna make it?!? What's wrong with her?" Fredquisha finally had the strength to ask her barrage of questions.

"Well, I am doing my best to make sure Myyah pulls through, but unfortunately things are not looking so great. We ran some blood tests. She suddenly came down with a severe case of bacterial meningitis. It's an infection of her brain. We have her on heavy rounds of antibiotics to ward off the infection. We just conducted a cat scan earlier and her brain has sustained a good deal of damage."

"So, what you saying is she brain dead?"

Dr. Swati took a deep breath. "Almost…Not quite."

"So, I am so confused. Is what you doin' gonna work or not?!?"

"We don't know yet. We have her in an induced coma to see how well the therapies will work. It might take some hours to up to a day to know for sure. But it is probably best to be prepared to make final preparations…"

“NO! No! No! You gotta do somethin’! Ya’ll got all of this damn equipment and shit and ya’ll mean to tell me ya’ll can’t save my daughter?!? How did she even get the infection??!?”

Dr. Swati pursed his lips and slightly lowered his gaze. He looked over at Evelyn. NaNa was visibly tired and upset. Couldn’t even give her own daughter eye contact.

“Ma! What happened to her?!? What did you do?” Fredquisha strolled over to Evelyn and looked her up and down with a slightly annoyed and anxious gaze.

“I don’t know, girl. She said last night she had got bitten by a roach on her face. I didn’t believe it ‘cuz how in the hell a roach gon bite her!”

“WHAT?!? You mean to tell me a muthafuckin’ roach in yo apartment bit her?!?”

“That’s what she said, but you and I know damn well ain’t no goddamn roaches biting people like that. Bitch, we from the projects. We deal wit roaches all the time. I think she got sick at that other grandma’s house! Ain’t no damn roach gon give her meningitis!”

Fredquisha closed her eyes and rapidly tapped her foot against the cold ground. “This not even makin’ no damn sense!”

“Uhummm,” Dr. Swati cleared his throat. “Ladies, can I please ask you to lower your voice. We have other patients…”

“Fine, sorry Doctor,” Evelyn apologized.

“I will be right back to do another round of checks. In the meantime, please I ask you to maintain your volume,” Dr. Swati explained and then exited the room.

“Where is Quimani and Zy’meer?” Fredquisha asked.

“They downstairs with Ray’nem.”

“Uncle Ray?”

“Yeah…” Evelyn coughed. “So, when you gon’ call Mrs. Watkins and let her know what happened?”

“I don’t know, I can’t even think about that shit yet. I don’t wanna call her just yet ‘cuz then it’s gon be all types of fuckin’ bullshit and I already wanna fight that hoe!”

“Well, you better think about this, ‘cuz umm, if you trying to get DCFS off your back, it’s best you call her and let her know in case Myyah don’t make it. Then, they gonna really take them boys away. You want that?”

“Ma, is that all you care about?!? My baby girl is sitting up here fucking dying and yo—”

“No! You ain’t gon’ do that to me! No, little girl!” Evelyn interrupted as she stood up from her seat. “Don’t try to act like you care about the girl and what not now. I been told yo ass to let the other grandma take care of her since you always had an issue with

her. Now that her ass is almost dead you suddenly wanna act like a mothafuckin' mother and shit. Bitch, you need to get real, get right and do what you gotta do to fix this shit. 'Cuz quite frankly I'm tired of mopping up yo shit!"

"You know what, Ma! Fuck you!"

"Bitch, FUCK ME?!?"

"Ay, come on, ya'll, the doctor said be quiet!" Donterio barked, quickly coming in between the two women who looked like they were on the verge of getting into an all-out physical brawl.

Katina, hearing the commotion, quickly entered the room and scanned the situation. She already knew from the faint expletives being dropped of what was going down in room 809.

"Excuse me, ya'll. I am sure the doctor already told ya'll to be quiet or else. Please lower your voice or we are going to have to ask you to leave and you won't be able to see Myyah until tomorrow!"

Crazy ain't it…Little did Fredquisha know she was being chastised by the very woman whose ex-nigga was now staying with her for the time being. Deontae was nowhere in sight. He actually took off. Told Fredquisha to give him a call once she got done and he would take her back to her crib.

The entire family didn't respond to Nurse Katina though. They just slightly nodded their head in agreement. Once Katina exited the room, Evelyn pushed her way past Fredquisha and said, "I need a cigarette."

Donterio stood his ground and then glared over at Fredquisha. "Sis, you gotta chill. It's gonna be alright. You just gotta be strong and be there for Myyah."

MooMoo just huffed, not responding. No time for the inspirational bullshit her younger brother loved spewing from time to time every time they interacted.

Younger bro, despite being as hood as they come, was always the more positive, upbeat sibling in his family. He wasn't aware of the extent of the emotional and occasional physical abuse wrought onto Myyah from his oldest sister, so he was extremely sympathetic.

"Just let me have some alone time with her, ok?" Fredquisha asked Donterio.

"Ok…" He respected her wish and quietly left the ICU room.

Fredquisha pulled a chair from the corner closer to Myyah's bed. She sat down and began to carefully observe her daughter's chest right with each pump of air going into her fragile chest. With each passing second, each passing minute, Fredquisha contemplated her next move. Evelyn was right though. Eventually, MooMoo needed to do the right thing and call Mrs. Watkins before the situation got even more grave. Reluctant, of course. But it had to be done. Fredquisha spent the next five minutes watching Myyah as the chirping of the EKG machine

echoed throughout the room. From afar Fredquisha could sobs emanating from distant rooms. A child just died, and now a mother was locked into utter anguish, wailing to God to bring her baby back. That was not a state of emotion Fredquisha was prepared for at all. For the first time ever in her life, Fredquisha did something she never thought she'd do. She leaned forward, grabbed Myyah's delicate brown hand and rubbed it. She leaned down and kissed as tears fell from her eyes and onto the top of Myyah's soft hand. "Please, baby girl, don't die on me. Mommy is so sorry for everything I've done to you. If you make it, please, I promise I'll be the best mommy ever. I take back everything I've ever said to you. Every mean thing I've ever done to you." Fredquisha continued to plan kiss after kiss onto Myyah's hand.

"I'm back," Evelyn announced as she coolly and unapologetically strolled back into the room and made her way back to the other corner seat. Still no empathetic eye contact was given to her eldest. She was beyond frustrated because she felt this entire situation could've been avoided. A part of this was her fault, but also, she felt some blame should've gone to Fredquisha.

Fredquisha continued to sob holding Myyah's hand. Once she gathered herself she tucked her arm back to her side and stood up from the seat. "I'm finne go call Mrs. Watkins right now and let her know what's going on. Be right back," Fredquisha stammered and quickly jetted out of the room.

Once she made her way down the corridor and near the elevators, she whipped out her phone, pulled up Mrs. Watkins' number and hit dial.

Three rings later…

"Umm, what do you want?" Mrs. Watkins answered.

"Mrs. Watkins…" Fredquisha paused for a moment to contain herself. She was almost on the verge of tears again.

"Yesss?????" Fredquisha could hear Mrs. Watkins rolling her eyes through the phone.

"Myyah's in the hospital. It ain't lookin' too good…"

Chapter Thirty-Eight

Mrs. Watkins, up and energetic as usual, cheerfully strolled through the Cook County Jail visitor's parking lot. Austin had called her a day ago and told her he wanted her to come down so he could reveal a surprise to her. She didn't think much of it, just thought maybe he'd received an admissions letter in the mail from a college or university that he'd applied to.

The sun by the point in the day was manifesting its full glory, searing the back of Mrs. Watkins neck as she tried to diligently make her way through the vast parking lot. All of a sudden, she felt her phone go off inside her purse. She pulled it out and saw that Fredquisha was calling her.

Why was this bitch calling her? Grandma thought as she huffed and rolled her eyes. The phone kept ringing. She really didn't want to respond because if she did she had so much to lay onto the woman. "Fuck it, let me see what this scumbag whore wants…"

"Umm, what do you want?" Mrs. Watkins answered.

"Mrs. Watkins…"

Fredquisha then panned to silence.

"Yesss?????" Mrs. Watkins rolled her eyes through the phone as she steadily made her way closer and closer to the entrance of the jail.

"Myyah's in the hospital. It ain't lookin' too good…"

"What? Wait, what the fuck are you talking about?!? Are you bullshitting me and playing games on my phone, little ass girl?!?"

"No, Mrs. Watkins. I'm for real. Look, just come down to the hospital as soon as possible. Myyah is in the ICU at Northwestern Children's Hospital in Downtown."

Mrs. Watkins paused for a moment and seriously gave credence to what Fredquisha just mumbled. Damn, was she really serious? Mrs. Watkins could sense by the depressed and dark tone of Fredquisha's voice that something was seriously wrong with baby girl. Tears began to form in her eyes.

"Wait, Fredquisha, please, tell me you are not playing games with me…"

"Mrs. Watkins…I'm not. Myyah is in a coma. The doctors saying

she got meningitis from a bug bite. I don't know what happened. The social workers dropped her off at my mama's place last night. I was at my place when my mama called me. I didn't even know what happened 'cuz I just got to the hospital myself not too long ago," Fredquisha cried.

"Ohmygod, ohmygod, Lord Jesus. Please tell me she's going to make it! Meningitis! Please, no, God, no! This is all your fault Fredquisha! ALL YOUR FUCKING FAULT"

"Mrs. Watkins, please, I ain't got time for all that right now! We need to be here for Myyah!"

"BITCH, FUCK YOU! YOU NEVER WAS THERE FOR MYYAH IN THE FIRST PLACE! BITCH, I SWEAR TO GOD WHEN I GET UP TO THAT HOSPITAL I'M GONNA FUCK YOU UP AND THAT STUPID, FAT ASS GHETTO MAMA OF YOURS! JUST WATCH, BITCH!"

"Bitch, you ain't gon do shit to me! Put your hands on me and see I'll mop the floors with yo old ass! Lookin' like a busted ass Jada Pinkett on crack! Bitch, me and my mama will fuck you up if you try us!"

Mrs. Watkins couldn't hear anymore. Suddenly angered and ready to explode she hung up the phone and threw it back into her purse. She picked up her steps and dashed her way into the visitor's center of the massive jail complex. Once inside and checked in, she made her way straight to the hospital.

~

"So, take this once a day for the pain, but no more than twice a day because this is a very powerful anti-pain medication…" One of the nurses who worked inside the jail hospital was explaining to Austin instructions on how to take anti-pain meds once he was released.

Knock. Knock.

The conversation was suddenly interrupted by the loud knocks at the room door. The nurse, a plump young Latina, somewhat around Austin's age, as well as Austin himself turned their attention towards the door. Once it creaked open, Mrs. Watkins, visibly disturbed and angered, walked in and produced a nervous, somewhat fake smile. Her eyes were reddened. Her cheeks rosy.

"Hey, ma!" Austin smiled yet could immediately tell something was wrong. "What's going on? Allergies or something?"

"Excuse me, ma'am, can I talk to my son in private for a second?"

"Sure…" The nurse proceeded to walk out of the room.

"What's wrong, mama? Why you look like that?"

"Austin…" Mrs. Watkins got closer to Austin. "It's about Myyah. I just got a phone call from Fredquisha. Myyah is in the hospital and

apparently things aren't looking too good."

The concerned father screwed his face up and gawked at his mother strangely. "Wait, what are you talking about, mama? Why is she in the hospital?"

"She came down with meningitis. I don't know! I just literally got the call about twenty minutes ago from that bitch! We gotta get you out of here to see what's going on!"

"Mama, please, don't do this to me. No," Austin began to weep.

"I don't know Austin what's really going on! I gotta get to the hospital as soon as possible. This shit just ain't right! I just knew something bad was gonna happen to her! I just knew it!"

Austin lowered his gaze and sobbed uncontrollably.

"Shhh, shhh, shhh, come on now, we don't know the full facts yet. I'm gonna get down there and see what's going on. What did you have to tell me though?"

"Shit, man, I was gonna say the feds letting me out early because of what happened! But now this shit! Come on, bro!"

"Ohhhh my God!" Mrs. Watkins shook her head and wept even more.

"Just go, mama. Go see what's going on."

"Ok…" Mrs. Watkins quickly gathered herself and gave her son a tight hug. She kissed him on his forehead and then proceeded to make her way out of the hospital. Once she made it to the parking lot, she called for a Lyft and went straight to the hospital.

~

"Good afternoon, ma'am. I'm here to see a patient by the name of Myyah Watkins."

The same receptionist, Ms. Nowalski, glanced up at Mrs. Watkins and let out a slight smile. "Is it spelled M, Y, Y, A, H?" she asked.

"Yes. Exactly. Thank you so much."

"Gotcha. Some of the other relatives were here visiting. She's in the intensive care unit. Room 809. Go to the elevators and then shoot straight up to the 8th floor. Enjoy the rest of your day, ma'am."

"Thank you," Mrs. Watkins responded and then swiftly made her way to the elevators and then up to the ICU.

Grandma got off the elevator and was immediately slapped with confusion as to which way she should go to get to Myyah's room. But wasn't even a full thirty seconds once Mrs. Watkins turned her head to the right and saw down a corridor Fredquisha coming out of a room. Fredquisha spotted her as well and stood her ground.

As Mrs. Watkins got closer and closer to the room, Mrs. Watkins didn't say a word. She paused, clenched her fists and looked MooMoo

up and down.

"Move out of my way…" Mrs. Watkins took deep, heavy breaths – almost as if she was gearing up to go box the bitch if she dared tried to block her from entering the room.

MooMoo obliged. She simply rolled her eyes and silently moved to the side. Mrs. Watkins entered the room. Instantly taken aback by the dismal site of her granddaughter cling to her life, Grandma suddenly clasped her mouth in surprise and angst. This was all too real and raw for her, but it was almost as if it was destined to come. Mrs. Watkins' heart shattered to pieces as her eyes carefully scanned her precious granddaughter laying in deep sleep with several tubes running in and out of her small, slender body.

"Myyyah, no, baby girl, noooooooo," Mrs. Watkins sobbed as she made her way closer to the bed and began to massage Myyah's left arm. She then ran her hand across Myyah's chest, closed her eyes and tried to pray away this was not reality.

"Where's the doctor? I need to speak to the doctor!" Mrs. Watkins announced, now ready to confront those responsible for Myyah's deteriorated condition.

"I'ono," Evelyn mumbled, still not bothering to give anyone any type of eye contact. She too was a bit still disturbed by everything. Guilt was a motherfucker. But Evelyn was more tripped up by the sudden craziness given this was now a stumbling block, big boulder really, in her plans to come up and get out of South Shore and move to that Hyde Park luxury building.

"What even happened!?!? How in the hell did she get bit?!?"

"Shit, I don't know. You tell me. You had her for the entire weekend. She only spent one night at my house."

"No, no, no, no, don't try to spin this shit on me, bitch! How dare you!"

"Then, how else she get meningitis?!? She said she got bit by a roach at my house, but ain't no damn roaches biting no damn body! She came down with that shit at your place! I had her for one night. Bought the girl pizza and ice cream. We watched movies and she was all fine until the next morning!"

"Oh, fuck no! BITCH, I see what you all got planned! This is exactly why I called DCFS on your low life ass daughter!"

"Bitch, you called DCFS on me too?!?" Fredquisha growled from behind.

Evelyn stood up from her seat and made her way close to Mrs. Watkins.

"Bitch, get out of my face unless you wanna see the other side of me."

Katina, once again hearing the commotion, stormed the room.

“That’s it. Everyone needs to leave NOW before I call the hospital police.”

“I just got here! This isn’t fair!”

“BUT YOU STARTED IT WITH US!” Evelyn yelled back, still ready to use her hands if she had to. Katina recognized Evelyn’s combativeness and eyed her down. “Ma’am, I’m gonna have to ask you and your family to leave to let the other relatives have time with Myyah,” Katina demanded.

“But she my damn daughter!” Fredquisha spat.

“Ma’am, please do not make this more difficult than what it needs to be…”

Fredquisha huffed, rolled her eyes and then made her way out of the door along with Evelyn and Donterio. Before Donterio made it out the door, he stopped and turned his attention towards Mrs. Watkins. “I’m sorry about everything, Mrs. Watkins. I truly am. I apologize for my family.”

“BOY, BRING YO ASS OUT HERE! YOU TALKIN’ TO THE OPPS AND SHIT. FUCK WRONG WITCHU?!?” Evelyn growled under her breath and yanked Donterio out of the room.

Mrs. Watkins didn’t respond. Katina escorted MooMoo, Evelyn, and Donterio out of the ICU wing and to a visitor’s room allowing Mrs. Watkins to have some alone time with her granddaughter. Now that there was nothing more than serenity and calm inside the room, Mrs. Watkins, still sobbing, pulled a chair close to Myyah’s bed and buried her head into the bed next to the girl’s side.

“Oh, baby girl, I’m so sorry. I should’ve hidden you. I should’ve listened to you and now look at you. Please do not die on me baby girl, Do not let go. I need you. Your daddy needs you the most. Please, Father God, don’t do this to her. She didn’t’ ask for this lot in life.”

Mrs. Watkins began to pray over her granddaughter. Her overflowing tears of sorrow dampened the hospital bed.

Some moments later, as Mrs. Watkins was still enraptured in her prayer, asking God to bring total healing and recovery to Myyah, Dr. Swati entered the room.

“Ma’am…”

Mrs. Watkins opened her praying eyes, turned around and looked at the doctor.

“Are you the doctor?”

“Yes…”

“Hi, I’m Mrs. Watkins…Myyah’s other grandmother. Is she going to pull through?”

Dr. Swati took a deep breath and exhaled. He pursed his lips and stood solemnly.

“It’s not looking too good, ma’am. She's sustained a serious brain

injury from the infection. She had eighty-percent brain damage since she went into cardiac arrest. Right now she has enough function to maintain vitals, but in a situation like this, because she's so young, eventually once we pull back the respirator and the meds, more than likely she will be gone in hours unless we come up with another solution…"

"Oh, noooo, please, no. This cannot be real. Please, doctor," Mrs. Watkins lowered and shook her head. More tears raced down her cheeks.

"I'm sorry, ma'am. Is the father aware of what's going on?"

"Yes, and no…He's currently incarcerated."

"Oh…I am…sorry to hear that."

"No worries."

"Well, it's best to consult with him as soon as possible. However, after speaking with my nurses, if an end-of-life decision has to be made, I was informed that the mother, Fredquisha, is the sole guardian and will have the right to take Myyah of life support."

"Wait, what?!?"

"Yes…"

"I'm sorry. I know it's unfortunate, but it's the law."

Mrs. Watkins didn't respond. She just turned her attention away from the doctor and dug her face back into the bed. As the whooshing sound of the ventilator clashed with chirps of the EKG machine, Mrs. Watkins returned to her prayer.

"…Oh, Father God, I absolutely believe you have the power to heal. You demonstrated that on earth, and you still heal in miraculous ways today. Even when my faith is weak, you say it is enough, and my love for you is strong. And I know you already hold my heart and life in your hands. It's up to you. If I can bring you more glory through Myyah's healing, then that's what I ask for. That's what I desire. But if your answer is no, or not now, I know that your grace is sufficient for me."

Chapter Thirty-Nine

11:01 AM danced on the massive electronic clock inside the stuffy Illinois DCFS office.

Something just wasn't sitting right with her.

Nausea grew in her stomach. A tension headache throbbed her temples.

Since dropping Myyah off at her other grandmother's house, Ms. Gonzales just knew she was making the wrong decision. That night after she left Myyah in the custody of a woman who she just sensed wasn't equipped to take proper care of her, Ms. Gonzales intuition kept screaming at her to do something. Do whatever was necessary to save that girl. Before it was too late…

Sitting at her desk, pondering over a mound of paperwork, Ms. Gonzales needed to work quickly to fix the situation. She didn't know how she was going to do it but it had to be done. She picked up her belongings, dashed outside, hopped in her car and sped off to Daley Elementary over in the neighboring Englewood.

~

Ms. Gonzales took serious strides inside of the elementary school and quickly made her way straight to the front office. "Good Morning, ma'am," she announced in front of the receptionist sitting at a desk listening to the radio blaring Luther Vandross.

"Good Morning," Cassandra, the school's front office secretary and attendance clerk looked up at the social worker and produced a somewhat flat smile. "How can I help you?"

Ms. Gonzales proceeded to pull out her official Illinois DCFS badge and flashed to the tanned, voluptuous attendance clerk. "My name is Victoria Gonzales and I am a case manager with Illinois DCFS. I am trying to do an attendance check-in for a student currently enrolled at the school."

"Oh, ok. What's the name of the student?"

"Myyah Watkins…"

"Oh…" Cassandra's disposition suddenly changed. "Yeah, I just got

a call from Evelyn, her grandmother. Apparently, she's in the hospital. She's really sick."

"What?!? I just saw her last night…"

"Yeah, I don't know. Apparently, she was sick earlier this week too. That's what her mother told us why she missed school. We have no idea what's going."

"Did they tell what hospital she's currently in?"

"No…"

"Damn it…" Ms. Gonzales threw her hands in the air and held her hand. "Sorry, I am currently conducting an investigation and it's important I try to track down the girl."

"I wish I could be of more service to you, but there isn't any more information I have. All I know is her grandmother called in crying, saying Myyah was terribly sick in the hospital. It sounded really serious."

"Ok, thank you so much…" Ms. Gonzales smiled. "Have a good day, ma'am." Once she ended the conversation she dashed out of the door and back to the parking lot. Once she hopped inside the car she sped off back to her office to figure out exactly where Myyah was at.

~

12:15 PM. Another day, another dollar for Ms. McGill and her bubbly DCFS case manager social worker colleagues. Among the smacking of rib tips and strawberry sodas procured from I-57 BBQ restaurant, the women were huddled in their area of the office floor, talking, joking and gossiping about the usual topics.

As usual Ms. McGill's sex life became the eventual subject of the lunch conversation. "Girl, yesss! Bitch, let me tell you what James did. He took some of that good ass Wing Stop ranch and dripped all down my coochie. Nigga slopped it all up," Shirley laughed as she wiped bbq sauce from around her greasy lips.

"Bitch, you gon get a nasty yeast infection if you keep engaging in this freaky shit. Watch and see. Yo pussy gon be out of commission for a good two months!" Theresa joked.

"Ahumm, Ms. McGill, can I talk to you for a second?"

Ms. Gonzales' stern announcement interrupted the live conversation between the gregarious black women.

"Hey, chica! What's going on?" Ms. McGill chuckled as she took a swig from her soda can.

"It's about one of the cases currently assigned to you. I was on call last night to do an emergency pick up for a child by the name of Myyah Chennelle Watkins. Sounds familiar?"

"Yeah, what's going on? I already had the mother's caseworker

down at section 8 to do a home visit since that's also in their jurisdiction. I'm about to turn in a report."

"No, don't do that yet. The girl is in the hospital. I just spent the last hour or so trying to find out where she's at. I don't know what's wrong with her, but I did an attendance check-in at the school. The grandmother called in and said Myyah is gravely ill. I just called about three hospitals. I was able to track her down to Northwestern."

"Huh?!? So, wait…what made you do all of this if you had no real motive?" Ms. McGill asked, her tone suddenly becoming serious and a tad condescending.

"Because when I dropped her off last night with a police escort, the grandmother's apartment didn't look, well, it didn't look right to me."

"What are you trying to say? I mean, was it dilapidated? Roaches and rats running all over the place?"

"Ms. McGill – why didn't you do the home visit?"

"I got sick. Like I said, I had one of my girls down at Section 8 do it."

"But Ms. McGill, if you read the original report coming in from the hotline as well as the recent police report filed when the mother got into a fight with her two sons, you should've at least got someone else in our office to do a home visit. Now, this girl could be having a serious health issue because it seems like you didn't care too much…"

"Excuse me?" Ms. McGill's voice became very audible, loud enough to make the women around her turn around in her seats and mind their business. "Let me talk to you for a second in the conference room," Ms. McGill commanded.

The two women made their way inside of the conference room a few feet away. Ms. McGill slammed the door. Instantly Ms. Gonzales became shaken. "Ms. McGill, all of that isn't even necessary."

"Listen, let me tell you something. You are a rookie around here. I been doing this for thirty years. I'd be damned if you are gonna come in here and tell me how I am not doing my job. You gon respect me or else—"

"Or else what? Ms. McGill. You violated protocol. You didn't technically do the home visit. You are submitting potentially false information based on the testimony of someone not in our department, but from the city. How do we even know this case manager down at CHA even did a thorough inspection?"

Suddenly Ms. McGill got up into the younger girl's face. "You just don't get it, do you?" Ms. Gonzales didn't back down. "You think just because you some ole young white girl with a degree from the University of Chicago and shit, you can come in here and tell us black people what to do? I know my people. I know my community. Nothing happened to that girl according to the CHA caseworker. And I

trust her advice. So, if you don't mind, I'm gonna go back and finish my lunch. Just mind your own damn business and work on your assigned cases. Thank you for last night, but I don't need any more of your assistance. Just drop it."

"Ms. McGill, I am going to have to go to the director about this. This isn't right. You aren't even showing the urgency to even drop what you are doing now to check up on the girl…. And for the record, I'm half black and grew up in Gary."

Ms. McGill couldn't say anything to rebut Ms. Gonzales. Hearing that her "colleague" was not only half-Black but grew up in a predominantly black Gary, Indiana was a jab at her ignorance and there was just no way she could come back. She just pushed past the young Hispanic social worker and went back to her desk.

Ms. Gonzales, however, wasn't going to back down. She was going to take things into her hands now. By any means necessary. Even if it meant she had to clash with the veteran social worker. Ms. McGill thought her clout and power inside the office was going to shut Ms. Gonzales down, but that wasn't the case. Right is right. Wrong is Wrong. DCFS wronged Myyah – otherwise possibly she wouldn't be in the position she was now in.

The young, mission-oriented social worker hurried back to her seat. She grabbed her belongings, laptop, issued cell phone and car keys. She once again made her way outside and made her way to her car. Off to Northwestern, she went in order to see about Myyah.

~

Ms. Gonzales strolled through the automatic double doors of the hospital and made her way straight to the receptionist's desk. "Good afternoon, ma'am. I'm here to check on a patient by the name of Myyah Watkins." Ms. Gonzales pulled out her DCFS badge and showed it to the woman. "I'm a state clinical social worker with DCFS. It's very important I see her."

Once again, the same receptionist. Ms. Nowalski glanced up at the social worker and let out a light smile. "Is it spelled M, Y, Y, A, H?"

"Yes…."

Already familiar with where Myyah was at, the receptionist didn't need to look up any of her info. "She's in the intensive care unit. Room 809. Go to the elevators and then shoot straight up to the 8th floor. Enjoy the rest of your day, ma'am."

"Thank you," Ms. Gonzales politely responded and then promptly made her way to the elevators and then up to the ICU. She got off the elevator, and like so many before her, was immediately slapped with confusion as to which way she should go to get to Myyah's room.

No one was around to ask for directions. The social worker just made a right and proceeded down the bright, cold, and quiet corridor of the ICU wing. She approached the nurse's station. "Good afternoon, ma'am. My name is Victoria Gonzales. I'm a state clinical social worker with the Illinois Department of Children and Family Services. I'm here to check up on a patient by the name of Myyah Watkins?"

Katina, sitting idly at the nurse's station going through some paperwork, gawked up at the social worker. Returning a light smile, she got up and walked over to Ms. Gonzales. "Come with me, she's in room 809. Her grandmother is in there."

"Which one?"

"I believe she's the paternal grandmother."

Butterflies instantly formed in the hungry pits of Ms. Gonzales' stomach. "Oh, ok." Fuck, she thought to herself. This wasn't going to be a good look. How was she going to be able to look this woman in her face – the woman who should've rightfully cared for the girl all along – and tell her she essentially along with her agency fucked up big time.

Katina and Ms. Gonzales made their way towards the room.

Knock. Knock. Two light taps Katina gave the frame of the door to grab Mrs. Watkins' attention. Still disconcerted, Mrs. Watkins turned in her seat. Her sobbing face instantly grew into one of anger. "What are you doing here?"

Ms. Gonzales couldn't hold back though. Her eyes instantly watered and she clasped her face. Katina looked at the two women and then quietly took off.

"I'm so sorry, Mrs. Watkins. I…I was just doing my job."

"Well, look at what your job did."

"What happened to her? What's going on?"

"Meningitis…She's on life support. Most of her brain is damaged from her heart-stopping, the doctor said. They are hoping she might recover, but it ain't looking good."

"How in the hell did she get it?!? She was just fine when I dropped her off…"

"I don't know. Her other grandmother said she got bit by a roach. But they wanna blame it on me and say she got it from somewhere else."

"I'm, I'mmm, soo-ssorry, Mrs. Watkins," Ms. Gonzales wept as she wiped tears from her face. Although in her tenure she's seen some pretty nasty situations, this one was incredibly heartbreaking. Heartbreaking because she felt one-hundred percent responsible for all of this.

Mrs. Watkins though wasn't feeling the empathy or sympathy. Truth be told, she just wanted to continue to be alone with the girl

and continue her prayer. No interruptions. She needed God to show up now.

Ms. Gonzales just stood there, now quiet, yet visibly disturbed seeing all of the tubes running in and out of Myyah's limp, motionless body.

"Mrs. Watkins…"

"What?" Grandma rudely responded.

"I don't know about you, but I believe in prayer…Can I pray for her?"

Mrs. Watkins turned in her seat once more, but this time with widened, watery eyes. Hearing those words made her give in. "Yes, if you want to. We can pray together. The more the better…"

"Ok…" Ms. Gonzales made her way closer kneeled down next to Mrs. Watkins. Grandma extended her left hand. Ms. Gonzales grabbed it. Both women then closed their eyes, and the social worker, this time needed to be proactive. It was her time to go to God and plead for his divine intervention.

"Lord Jesus, thank you for your continued mercy and blessings and showering your love on this precious, innocent girl named Myyah. I know that you hate what their illness is doing to them I ask, in the name of Jesus, that you would heal this disease, that you would have compassion and bring healing from all sickness. Your word says that when we call out to you the Eternal one you will give the order, heal and rescue us from certain death. In the Bible, I have read of miraculous healing and I believe that you still heal the same way today. I believe that there is no illness you cannot heal after all the bible tells of you raising people from the dead so I ask for your healing in this situation. I also know from my experience of life on earth that not everyone is healed if that happens here than keep my heart soft towards you, help me, help us, to understand your plan. Lord Jesus, thank you that our hope for healing is in you. If there are doctors or treatments that you would want to use to heal this disease I pray that you would guide the doctors to them. I ask for wisdom and discernment about which treatments to pursue. God, I thank you that Myyah belongs to you and that you are in control of everything that happens from our first breath to our last sigh. Amen."

Chapter Forty

Beep. Beep. Beep. Beep.

Whoosh. Whoosh. Whoosh.

The sustaining sounds of Myyah's tiny heart beating, still clinging to life. Air continued to pump into her lungs through the life support machine.

It was around 3 PM and Mrs. Watkins was still in the room, closely snuggled against Myyah. Still in a deep prayerful, quiet trance, Ms. Watkins was just assured Myyah would be delivered from this tribulation. This was just a test of everyone's faith she wholeheartedly believed. With her faith unwavering Mrs. Watkins just knew once Myyah came out of this situation she was going to fight hard more than ever to get custody of her.

Knock. Knock. Katina was standing at the door.

"Mrs. Watkins…Dr. Swati and his team need to do some tests on Myyah. Can you please go to the visitor's area? When he is done, I will come get you and you can spend more time with Myyah," the nurse politely and calmly instructed.

"Ok," Mrs. Watkins responded as she got up from her seat. She leaned over and planted a delicate kiss on top of Myyah's forehead and then rubbed the top of her hand. "I love you, baby girl. Pull through for me. Pull through for your daddy. He loves and misses you."

Grandma then exited the room. Following Katina's instructions, she made her way to the visitor's area. The room was somewhat crowded. And from the aura, Mrs. Watkins knew most of the people in the waiting area were Fredquisha and Evelyn's relatives. Evelyn glanced up at Mrs. Watkins, huffed and rolled her eyes. MooMoo willfully ignored her.

Grandma Watkins felt a tad uncomfortable being in the visitor's area, so she decided to head to another visitor's area so she can have real solace to herself. Besides, she also wanted to go ahead and see if she could get in touch with someone down at the jail and figure out a way to inform Austin about the state of his only daughter. Despite Austin being on the cusp of getting released and still being in the

hospital, inmates could only make phone calls from approved personnel phones or from heavily monitor collect phones. Mrs. Watkins hopped on the elevator and made her way to the seventh floor. She found the visitor's area, sat in the corner and pulled out her cell phone. She immediately pulled up Dr. Sterling's contact info and dialed her number.

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Knock. Knock. Knock.

Austin, reeling in slight pain, was anxiously awaiting any information he could get about his daughter. His mind was heavy. Soul in turmoil. The three thuds at the door temporarily took his mind away. "Come in," Austin barked.

Dr. Sterling walked with a serious look on her face. Her cell phone was glued in her hand. "Hey, Austin. I have your mother on the line. She has some information about Myyah…"

"Ok," Austin responded. Grief beginning to overtake the tone of his voice.

The jail-based social worker sauntered next to the bed and handed Austin the phone. "Hey, mama. What's the good news?" Austin nervously grinned.

"Austin…." Mrs. Watkins then let out a sigh. "I'm praying. I'm praying hard. However, things aren't looking good. I spoke to the doctor and Myyah did come down with a bad case of meningitis. She sustained some pretty serious brain damage and now she's on life support."

"What? No, please, mama. Please, no. This can't be real. Please tell me this can't be real." Long tears began to drizzle from the skies of his white eyes now turning red.

"Yes, Austin. This is real, unfortunately. But we gotta keep on praying and believing this is just a test."

Austin took the phone away from his ear for a second and clutched his mouth. His face tightened as more tears streamed down his dark brown chiseled face. Sobs poured from his mouth. Dr. Sterling, doing her best to console Austin, massaged his shoulder. Austin placed the phone back to his ear. "I'm gonna keep praying, mama."

"Do that, son. Do that. I'm gonna go back up in a few and see what the doctors said. They are performing some more tests on her."

"Ok. I love you, mama."

"I love you too, son. Myyah loves you too. Just know that. She loves you."

Austin didn't respond. He couldn't take it anymore. He handed the phone back to Dr. Sterling and immediately began to weep. His tears

were plentiful and his aching sobs filled the room.

Dr. Sterling leaned over and hugged Austin. She rocked him back and forth and did her best to console him.

“Why? Why?!? Why did this have to happen to her, God?!? She didn’t deserve this shit, bro!”

“Shh, shhh, everything happens for a reason, Austin. You have to believe that.”

“Dr. Sterling, I gotta see her before it’s too late. Is there a way I can see her?”

“Ughh, I don’t know. Usually, it has to be extenuating circumstances. I’ll see what I can do. I’ll talk to some people right now and see what can be done.”

“Ok,” Austin mumbled.

“Stay strong, Austin. Myyah needs you when she pulls out of this. I’m going to be praying for you all as well. Let me go and see what can be done, ok?”

“Ok…”

Dr. Sterling exited the room and gently closed the door on her way out. Austin just knew deep in his heart his baby girl wasn’t going to make it. He couldn’t shake the feeling despite wanting to be positive. But something just told him all along something like this was bound to happen to Myyah. He just knew it, which was why he tried so hard before he got locked up to get his baby girl out of Fredquisha’s custody. If Myyah pulled through though, he was going to war. He was going to get his baby girl at any cost.

Chapter Forty-One

"Hey, Patricia. Can you go grab the mother and grandmothers of Myyah?" Dr. Swati announced towards the nurse's station as he coolly and sternly strolled out of Myyah's room.

"Yessir. I'll go get them now," the young blonde nurse responded as she stood up from her seat at the nurse's station and began her journey to the visitor's area to go grab Fredquisha and Evelyn.

Katina's overtime shift ended and she made her way back home so she can go straight to the police station and file the protective order against Deontae.

Once the young, slender blonde nurse made her way into the visitor's area, she gawped at Fredquisha and Evelyn. A few cousins, siblings and other relatives were in the visitor's area with Evelyn and MooMoo.

"Hey, you guys. Dr. Swati would like to speak to the mother and grandmothers of Myyah," Patricia announced.

"Ok," Evelyn mumbled as both she and Fredquisha stood up from their seats.

"Where's the other grandmother?" Patricia asked.

"I don't know. She left," MooMoo spat. A tad rude she was.

"Ok…"

The white nurse led Evelyn and Fredquisha down the corridor and into Myyah's room. Dr. Swati was in the room along with another doctor – a medium, dark-skinned man with a shiny bald head.

"Good evening, ladies…"

"Evenin'," Evelyn mumbled and cleared her throat. She had a cigarette earlier and her mouth was a bit dry.

"Well, this is my colleague, Dr. Obasanjo. We've done some more tests on Myyah and unfortunately, her brain has gone through some more decline. I believe it is the right thing to begin terminating life support. With the type of brain damage, she's sustained she may not fully recover. It appears that Myyah is in an extreme vegetative state and at this point, only a miracle will reverse everything…"

MooMoo began to choke up and lowered her head. Evelyn grabbed her and held her. "Shh, shh, don't cry, baby girl. Don't cry."

“I’m so sorry about this. Have you all be in contact with the biological father?” Dr. Swati inquired.

“No…He’s in jail.”

“Where is the other grandmother?”

“I don’t know where she at…”

“Patricia, can you please go locate the other grandmother.”

“Ok, sir…” Patrice quickly exited the room to go locate Mrs. Watkins.

Dr. Swati gently approached the two grieving women. He held tightly to a thick clipboard in his hand. Dr. Obasanjo came to his side. “We have a counselor on site to help you all plan for this decision. We will still be monitoring Myyah’s condition closely. I will perform another final test in a few hours and then I will let you know what your next decision should be…”

“Ok,” Fredquisha moaned as she wiped her damp face free of tears.

“Come on, let’s go and talk about out this in private,” Evelyn muttered.

“No worries…Dr. Obasanjo and I will leave you all to have privacy. I will consult with the other grandmother to let her know what’s going on. I believe it is important to allow the biological father to also see his daughter before a final decision is made. Although you are the legal guardian, I would not recommend removal of the ventilation system until all relatives have had their chance to say goodbye.”

“I understand,” Fredquisha mumbled.

“Ok. I will leave you two in peace now. Once again, I’m so sorry that there isn’t more we can do at this time…”

Dr. Swati and Dr. Obasanjo made their way out of the room leaving Fredquisha and Evelyn in solace with baby girl.

Evelyn waited for a few moments until she felt she had the quiet and privacy to say what she was about to say. The shady grandmother looked around and got into close proximity to her daughter. “So what you gon do?” she asked in a serious, demanding manner.

“What you mean what I’m gon do?”

“About Myyah…Are you gonna let them pull the plug?”

“I mean, that’s what they saying we should do…I mean, what else we gonna do?”

Evelyn shut her eyes and shook it. Damn, was her daughter this fucking stupid, she thought to herself. “You not thinkin’ long term. Fuck these doctors. What the fuck that short ass Indian man know? We need to get a second opinion. Besides, I don’t believe in just lettin’ people die like that. Damn doctors did yo granddaddy the same fuckin’ way. Told mama to just pull the plug. Nah, fuck that. We need to get her to a different hospital to get a second opinion…”

“Mama, what?!? You talkin’ crazy. Why would the doctors just be makin’ shit up like this? Besides, I just need to let Myyah go. Let her go on in peace. It just wasn’t meant for me to have her.”

Evelyn rolled her eyes and exhaled. “Look, I know you stress the fuck out right now, but again, you not thinkin’ long-term. While we was in the visitor’s area I was doin’ some research on my phone. There was this girl out in San Francisco who had somethin’ similar happen to her. They got her transferred to a rehab facility. We can still collect her government assistance and everything and what not…”

“Bitch, is that what you thinkin’ about right now? A mothafuckin’ check?!?”

Evelyn paused. Couldn’t say anything. She didn’t think he’d get that type of visceral reaction from MooMoo. Thought she would’ve been somewhat game at least.

“Hey, look bitch, I’m just tryin’ to look out for you…”

“Ma, just leave me alone. Go back to the visitor’s area…”

Evelyn rolled her eyes again and huffed. “Ok, fine. But just remember, this is all your fault.”

“Fuck you bitch…” MooMoo shoved her mother out of the way and made her way close to Myyah’s bed. She had enough of her mother for the day.

Evelyn’s eyes turned to vengeful slits as she made her way out of the room. She might lose Myyah, but those boys…They were hers now. She was going to do everything in her power to get them taken away from Fredquisha now that she saw her daughter was definitely not down for the program.

MooMoo sat next to the bed and held Myyah’s hand.

“I’m sorry, baby girl. I’m sorry…God, please, I’m so sorry…”

Chapter Forty-Two

Wednesday night.

Starry Chicago skies glistened over the vast Cook County Jail Complex. A few clouds filled the dark expanse, setting the gloomy tone.

Knock! Knock!

Two loud thuds pounced on Austin's hospital room door.

"Come in," Austin lowly mumbled. Dr. Sterling walked in with one of the jail guards.

"Hey, Dr. Sterling. What's going on?"

"Your mother is here to take you to go see Myyah. We talked to the Feds. They are going to grant you an earlier release given Myyah's condition. Get your belongings ready. I also have a bag of clothes you can change out of," Dr. Sterling said as she walked into the room and put the bag of clothes next to Austin's bed. "We'll be waiting outside…"

"Did you get any updates?"

"I am not too sure," Dr. Sterling responded. A neutral face projected her uncertainty although moments ago she did learn from Mrs. Watkins that Myyah's condition was deteriorating quickly. She didn't want to relay that information to Austin given she felt like it wasn't her place to do that and rightfully so.

"Ok…" Despite his side being in pain, Austin attempted his best to get up from the bed. He was wearing a long hospital-issued gown. Slippers covered his semi-ashy feet. Dr. Sterling left the room to give Austin some privacy.

As he opened up the bag filled with a change of clothes his anxiety ran high. A myriad of emotions began to crowd out his mind. Although he was still holding onto the belief that everything inevitably was going to be alright with Myyah, deep down his intuition kept informing him otherwise. He just sensed something was wrong. Terribly wrong. It was a dark feeling he simply couldn't shake. He knew his baby girl despite not really being able to be around her for the last two years.

Once Austin got changed, he made his way out of the room with

his belongings in his hand. Dr. Sterling and the same jail guard then escorted Austin out of the hospital. Before he left he signed release paperwork, officially freeing him from the confines of the jail. While a part of him was elated to be finally free after two long, arduous years of being locked up, a part of him – his heart – was still imprisoned to unrelenting darkness. The whole purpose of his freedom was to renew his life. Renew his commitment to stop running in the streets and do better for not just his sake, but for Myyah's sake. It was a dream he visualized every day – but now it seemed as though the dream was slowly fading away.

The night's darkness grew in pitch. Austin, along with Dr. Sterling and the jail guard made their way out of the Cook County Jail complex and approached a black Honda Accord. A Lyft ride Mrs. Watkins ordered to get here. Grandma was waiting idly and solemn. As she looked off from a distance and saw Austin make his way closer and closer to her in the relatively empty visitor's parking lot, her arms wrapped around her frame doing her best to keep herself warm from the cold, nighttime vicious Lake Michigan winds cutting through the air. A smile crept on her face, but it wasn't a smile of joy. It was a smile to help mask her deep apprehension.

"Hey, mama," Austin smiled. His eyes became watery as he lowered his gaze and went in to give her a hug.

"Austin…" Mrs. Watkins exhaled and closed her eyes.

"How is she doing? Is she any better?"

Mrs. Watkins pulled herself away from Austin and looked him his eyes. "No…"

Austin shut his eyes as he tried his best to contain his urge to bawl.

"So…What's happening now?"

"Fredquisha is discussing ending life support for Myyah. They haven't made a decision yet until you get a chance to see her."

Austin didn't respond.

Dr. Sterling, observing and hearing everything Mrs. Watkins just said, strode over Austin and placed her delicate hand on his shoulders. "Austin, I'm so sorry about everything. Don't stop believing in miracles though. Be encouraged. I have to get going. Austin, don't let this deter you from making the best of your life, ok?"

"Thank you, Dr. Sterling. Thank you for everything. I appreciate it."

"You're welcome…You all have a goodnight." Dr. Sterling grinned and went in to give Austin a hug, hopefully injecting him with the hope he needed to go through this trying time. Once she released herself from the hug she spun on her feet and coolly walked off with the jail guard to her side.

"Come on, let's get to the hospital as soon as possible," Mrs.

Watkins muttered. The two of them hopped into the backseat and took off to make it as quickly to Northwestern Children's Hospital.

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The elevator doors opened. Austin and Mrs. Watkins walked onto ICU floor and slowly made their way to Myyah's room. With each step Austin took, his stomach tightened and he almost became dizzy. Everything around him suddenly slowed down.

The moment they entered the room, the vibe and energy of everyone inside immediately shifted. Fredquisha was sitting down next to Myyah. Evelyn was sitting off in the corner with this scowl covering her face. Donterio was leaning up against the window.

"Well, well, well, look who it is…Thought you wasn't getting out for a few more months," Evelyn arrogantly spat.

Fredquisha turned around. Her face went from one of grief to one of annoyance. She said, "Hey," and then turned her attention back to Myyah.

"Oh my god! My baby girl…No, no, no, no, no, no! Please God, this is all just a dream…Please!" Austin cried as he strolled over to the bed. Niagra water falls tell down his dark brown cheeks. Can I have some alone time with her?" Austin politely asked, still weeping. He didn't have the time or the mental capacity to get into it with any of these trifling bitches. All his mind could think of was spending as much time he could with the girl. Seeing all of those tubes run in and out of her body was tearing him to shreds.

"Come on, mama. Let's give the man some space," Donterio said.

"Nah, I ain't goin' nowhere. Shut cho ass up," she barked at Donterio. She then looked at Austin and said, "This my granddaughter and you need to be even thankful we even let you in the room!"

"You know what you fat low life ass bitch, I'm ready to fuck you up! I'm tired of this shit!" Mrs. Watkins growled and suddenly tightened her fists, ready to go to war. She had enough of this pettiness.

"Come on, mama! Don't do that!" Austin cried.

Evelyn hopped on her feet and made a dash for Mrs. Watkins, but before she could get into the woman's face, Donterio lunged behind his mother and held her back. "Mama! STOP! What the hell are you doing?!? You foul as fuck!"

"LET ME THE FUCK GO!" Evelyn growled, ready to match Mrs. Watkins' energy.

"Ladies and gentlemen! This is unacceptable and Dr. Swati has given you all several warnings about this," Patricia, the white nurse, suddenly caught everyone's attention. "I am going to have ask

everyone to leave the room or I will call the police."

"BITCH, CALL THE POLICE! WHITE BITCH!" Evelyn screamed.

Austin, very much still emotional yet trying to diffuse the situation, held onto his mother. "Fredquisha, how did this shit even happen? What did you do to her?"

"I ain't do shit," Fredquisha responded no even giving Austin eye contact.

Dr. Swati suddenly made his entrance into the room. "Everyone must leave. The police are on their way," he announced.

"Are you the doctor?" Austin turned around and asked the short Indian man.

"Yes, I am. Are you the father?"

"Yes…"

"What's going on?!? I just got here and they won't even tell me anything!" Austin cried.

Dr. Swati pursed his lips… "It's not looking too good. From the bite, she got she now has a severe case of meningitis. Her brain is barely registering any activity."

"Wait, what?! What do you mean by bites? I'm so confused right now!"

Dr. Swati fell silent and tightened his lips up again. He took a deep breath and then exhaled. He looked over at a tense Evelyn as she knew the truth of how the bite got there in the first place.

"It looks like Myyah was bitten by some critters in the house. Although extremely rare, based on the tests we ran from the lab, Myyah has been bitten by a few cockroaches. Cockroaches are known for carrying viruses and other bacteria. Unfortunately, Myyah got a bad viral infection that spread to her brain."

"WHAT!?!? You mean by daughter got fuckin' sick because of fuckin' roaches!?! I DON'T BELIEVE THIS SHIT! I'm going to KILL THAT BITCH!"

"FUCK NIGGA, YOU AIN'T GON DO SHIT TO MY DAUGHTER!"

"Nah, fuck all that you fat ass old bitch! All them dope boy dicks she suckin' and fuckin' she could've been had a better place! Your daughter is just a nasty, trifling ass bitch who never did shit for my daughter!" Austin continued to scream.

Before a potential brawl ensued, hospital police stormed the room and shouted,

"Police! Everyone needs to leave the room now per the orders of the doctor! Visiting hours OVER! EVERYONE!"

"Nah, I'm staying here with my baby!" Fredquisha cried.

"BITCH YOU NEVER TOOK CARE OF HER!" Austin yelled.

"Ma'am, you have to leave too. EVERYONE," the police officer looked at Fredquisha who suddenly was putting on some sobbing

motherly front.

As more police officers flooded the ICU room, everyone was escorted out of the room and out of the intensive care unit. “Come on, let’s just get the fuck away from those ghetto ass niggas,” Mrs. Watkins grumbled as one group of police officers separated Austin and his mother as another group of officers pulled Fredquisha’s family away. “You all need to stay far away from them or we’re going to ban you all from the hospital, and might just even take you all to jail,” one of the officers warned. The same officer then looked at Austin and Mrs. Watkins and said, “I suggest you all go down to the cafeteria. I’ll tell the other officers to make sure the other family stays far away from you all.”

“Officer, this just isn’t fair. I barely even had a chance to see her,” Austin groaned as tears poured from heavy red eyes. “Man, I just got out of jail and found out she was on life support!”

The brute policeman was a tad unsympathetic to Austin’s plea. He shook his head and said, “I’m sorry guy, but this is still a hospital and once the doctor gives an order, we have to enforce it. If the doctor restores visitation rights, then we will work out an arrangement to make sure chaos doesn’t happen again, ok?”

“He can actually stay. Everyone else must leave…” Dr. Swati intervened as he approached the menacing policeman.

Mrs. Watkins pulled out a napkin from her purse and wiped Austin’s face free of tears.

“Everyone else has to leave though, including you ma’am,” the officer said to Mrs. Watkins.

“Ok…I’ll be down in the cafeteria, Austin. Jonah and his girlfriend are on their way.” Mrs. Watkins then quickly left the room with police escort to her side.

Dr. Swati then led Austin back into the room. “You can stay here for the next hour or so,” the doctor chirped then quickly made his way out of the room to give Austin much needed space.

As more tears kept running down Austin’s face, he sat in the chair next to Myyah’s bed and scanned her up and down. This shit was just still so unbelievable to him. Why God, why put my baby through all of this? She didn’t deserve this, Austin silently begged to his sense of a higher power. He grabbed Myyah’s hand and slowly massaged it. “Baby girl, please, you gotta get better for me and granny. I love you so much. Please don’t do this to me. I will do anything to make sure you come back to me.”

As the EKG machine kept chirping, monitoring Myyah’s low pulse and the ventilator kept pumping air into her lungs, Austin was so immobilized in pain and grief that all he could do was just cry and cry. His sobs were so intense that they ached his head. After a few

minutes passed and he was able to collect himself, all Austin could do at this point was to pray. Pray as hard as he could hoping God would send some sort of miracle.

An hour passed and just like he instructed, Dr. Swati made his way back into the room to end Austin's short visitation. It wasn't fair but given the precarious and tense situation between everyone, it had to be done.

"I'm so sorry about this, sir. I plan on running a few more tests with another colleague of mines from the University of Chicago Hospital. We are going to see if another treatment could work. I will let you know in the next few hours. I will also consult with the mother to let her know about my update."

"Ok, doctor. I appreciate it. Please, save my daughter. I am asking you to do everything you can."

"I will…If you need someone to talk to, we have counselors on site."

"I appreciate it." Austin made his way up from the bedside seat, leaned down and planted a kiss on top of Myyah's forehead. "Please, baby girl. Pull through from daddy. I love you. If you get better, I am going to do everything in my power to get you back and I promise 'til the day I die I will never let anyone harm you ever again."

Chapter Forty-Three

"Mama, do you need anything from the store? I'm gonna go to the Jewel to get some deli meat so I can pack my lunch for tomorrow," Katina asked her mother as she sat in the living room watching a rerun of Blackish.

"Nah, I'm good. But you sure you wanna go out this late? It's not safe, and besides, I don't know how I feel about you being out there with Deontae threatening you and shit."

Earlier that day, after getting off her shift, the first thing Katina did was go straight to the local police station in her mother' s neighborhood to see what she needed to do in order to get a protective order against Deontae. Unfortunately for her, she was informed that the process took place by going to the Cook County Court in Downtown and she'd need to do that first thing in the morning given they were already closed. In the meantime though, the police informed her that if Deontae continued to harass her, she could file a police report with them and they would possibly go out to look for him.

With all that in mind Katina still couldn't let Deontae's antics deter her from living life. The show still had to go on regardless if Deontae was going to act out. All Katina knew though was that if Deontae was going to pull the blickie on her again, she was going to pull hers out and use it.

"Mama, don't worry about me. I'm fine. Deontae ain't gon do shit. He's too much of a lazy ass to really take things there. He thought he could just ruffle my feathers, but baby I'm not bothered."

"You want me to go with you?"

"Nah, just stay here with the kids. I'm not gonna be gone for that long anyways…"

"Ok, well, take my car. The keys are on the table."

"Ok. Thanks!" Katina made towards the dining room table and grabbed her mother's car keys.

Despite it being summer, tonight was a tad chilly, so Katina had on a light denim jacket. It was also a way to conceal the heavy black gloc tucked on her side. A full clip was loaded inside the pistol. One was in

the chamber.

Katina strode through the dining room and then into the dark living room, the television's luminosity filled the room. The kids were in the living room too with their eyes glued to the television. "Alright ya'll, be right back. I got my cell on me in case you need anything, mama."

"Ok, just be safe and watch your surroundings."

"Don't worry. I won't be gone that long."

Katina made her way outside and to the driveway. She pressed the car alarm and opened the driver's side door to her mother's Toyota Camry.

POW! POW!

Two loud gunshots blasted out nowhere. Their echoes filled the dark Southside street.

Katina instantly froze for a second. Everything around her became still. The sharpness of the sound was so piercing to her ears the only thing she could hear was her own scattered thoughts scrimmaging in her mind.

She looked down and saw the right side of her denim jacket had a huge, growing plot of of her own blood. Was she shot? She pulled the jacket back and touch her side. Suddenly she collapsed to the ground. She pulled her hand up to her face and gawked at the sight of her own thick crimson blood covering her fingers. Her face, moments ago neutral and unconcerned, now was frightened and painful. The stinging pain of the gunshot wound spread to her side. As a trained nurse she now knew timing was everything. She could still breath. Her body was still in possession of energy – enough to quickly prop herself up against the car door.

"Tina! TINA!" Mama stormed out of the house with the kids to her side.

"I'm…I'm over here, mama," Tina cried out. "Hurry up, I've been shot!"

Mama, only wearing nothing but her nightgown and some slippers, scurried to the driver's side of the car and saw Katina trying her best to get up and stand up.

"Ohmygod! HE SHOT YOU!"

"I…I don't know, I need to get to the hospital quick, mama!"

The kids began to cry uncontrollably once they saw the condition their mother was in. Mattie, bawling herself, did her best to help Katina stand up straight. The nurse still clenched her side to contain the bleeding, but by the vast lake of blood evident on the driveway, it was just a matter of time before she was about to pass out.

"Ya'll go close the door and then get in the car! We gotta get to the hospital quick! Come on, Katina! Stay with me! Stay with me!" Mattie

commanded as she could tell Katina was now slowly slipping into unconsciousness.

Katina tried to fight the urge to close her eyes. Her body grew increasingly weak by the second. She thought just a moment ago she could hang in there, but now that the initial round of adrenaline that injected her with a faux sense of life began to wane away, her destiny was looking dark and grave. She just knew herself she was losing a good amount of blood and it was just a matter of time before she would succumb to darkness.

Mattie helped Katina over to the front passenger side and got her comfortably inside. “Please, baby, hang in there. Do not close your eyes, baby. Please do not die on me!”

“I’m tryin’, mama. I’m tryin’. Let’s go! Please!” Katina muttered as a few tears escaped the ducts of her heavy eyes.

The kids were now in the back seat – their attention completely throwing to what appeared to be their dying mother. “Mom, please don’t die on us. Please do not die on us!” Desiree begged her mother.

“I won’t…I won’t. Ya’ll just sit back and pray for me, ok?”

“Ok,” both children responded with sadness and anxiety laced in their cracking, shrieking voices.

As Mattie sped out of the driveway and headed towards the closest hospital, Holy Cross on 68th, Katina fought and fought. Mattie kept begging her to keep her eyes closed. Her children did the same. As much as she resisted, she couldn’t go on. Her pulse dropped. Her body began to grow limp and cold. Her breaths were light and shallow like feathers blowing in the wind. She closed her eyes and saw a great light beckoning her. Her head tilted the side and her breathing was no more.

~

An hour earlier…

“Yeah, suck that shit, bitch,” Deontae moaned as he sat back in his Monte Carlo, getting the sloppiest head from some Popeye’s drive-thru worker scalawag he met some few weeks ago.

Since dropping Fredquisha off at the hospital, he needed to clear his mind and get away from all of the drama that was happening. Although he knew he was pushing the limits by continuously threatening Katina, he was getting to the point where he was simply over her. Ready to move the fuck on and enjoy the newfound freedom of fucking as much as he could without worrying about having a baby mama-girlfriend staring down his back.

The 19-year-old girl went up and down his shaft, covering it up with the thickest, gooiest saliva she could form in her mouth (hours of

watching PornHub videos helped her perfect her head techniques), she tickled Deontae's balls and taint. Sure fire way to make a nigga bust the biggest nut.

As he toked a blunt, Deontae stared down at his lap, admiring the girl's dick sucking skills. "Shit, where the fuck you learn that shit from?"

The girl chuckled as she released the dick from out of her mouth. "This shit is all natural. Dick suckin' run in my DNA," she continued to laugh. She stuffed the dick back in her mouth and continued to glide up and down, but this time faster, ready to extract the nut out of Deontae's hardened, veiny pipe.

"AHHHHH! Shit!" Deontae screamed as his nut blasted all up in the girl's mouth.

The girl didn't even hesitate in swallowing buddy's nut. His sperm was zesty and refreshing like licking on two scoops of mint chocolate ice cream. She wiped her mouth and sat back in the seat. "So, when you gon fuck me? I'm ready to ride the dick!" she demanded.

"Shiiit, we can fuck in here too!" Deontae replied, dick still a bit hard, wafting it in his hand.

"Why we can't go back to your place?" the Popeye's THOT asked.

Deontae smacked his teeth. "Man, I'm still stayin' with my mama'nem…"

"Oh…Well, shit, let's just go over to my crib. I just got my section 8!"

Deontae looked over at the girl, eyes widened. Fuck Fredquisha, he thought.

"Ok, shit. Where you stay at?"

"On 47th and Drexel!"

"Shiiit, let's go! Can't wait 'til I eat that pussy!"

Chapter Forty-Four

10:31 tick tocked on the clock inside of Myyah's room as Austin made his way out. Taking his time to make it down the cold and bright corridor of the ICU floor, Austin still couldn't fathom how this was his reality. This was the day he longed for…To be free and be united with his daughter and change his life for her sake alone. But now there she was, alone, slowly dying in a hospital room with no one to her side other than a team of doctors trying to pull off one last miracle.

Austin strolled onto the elevator to make his way down to the cafeteria on the 2nd floor where his mother and his brother was at. "FUCK, FUCK, FUCK, FUCK!" Austin cried and roared as he punched one of the walls in the elevator. He shook his head and wiped his face free of tears. Although completely frustrated, Austin now realized there was nothing more he could do other than wait things out and hope God would somehow, someway pour down and gift him a miracle in the form of Myyah's recovery.

Once the elevator arrived on the second floor, Austin its sole occupant, he depressingly strode through the relatively quiet and somewhat empty cafeteria looking for his family. He scanned the floor. Over near a distant corner next to a Jimmy John's sub shop, the only restaurant that seemed open, there he spotted his mother along with his brother, Jonah, and his apparent girlfriend. He took slow, deliberate steps to them. Once he arrived, everyone stared at him, sensing he was so emotionally distraught. Austin couldn't hold it in anymore. He just broke down into more screams and tears.

"Son, please, just calm down. It's gonna be alright, it's gonna be alright, ok?" A crying Mrs. Watkins got up from her seat then wrapped her endearing arms around her emotionally wrecked son. Jonah, along with Miley, his girlfriend, wept as well as they encircled Austin and Mrs. Watkins. They all tightly hugged each other. "Come on bro, stay strong. We gotta be strong for Myyah. She can't see you breaking down like this, ok?"

Mrs. Watkins pulled out a napkin from her purse and wiped Austin's face free of tears. Jonah and Miley, sniffling, wiped their

faces and gave Austin some space.

"I just can't believe this. This is just too much. This is so fucked up on so many levels," Austin groaned as he sat in a seat next to his mother.

"I know, baby. I know. But our weeping will endure for a night, but we gotta believe joy will come in the morning. We gotta just keep praying and hoping something good is going to happen out of all of this, ok?"

"Ok," Austin solemnly replied. A part of him didn't believe anything good was going to happen. That was just wishful thinking that he now found himself guilty of being in possession of now that his only daughter was knocking at death's door. He just knew Myyah's passing was inevitable.

Although Austin sensed everyone around him seemed to be somewhat in denial, he wasn't. Being involved in the streets, seeing so many people get caught up, knowing of so many people who got killed, hardened Austin into always expecting the worse. Having hope is nothing more than a way to placate the inevitable.

"You want anything to drink or eat, Austin?" Mrs. Watkins asked.

"Nah, I'm good, mama…"

"Ok…"

"We're gonna go check out what they have, you sure you don't want anything bro. This has to be far better than that jail food," Jonah tried to somewhat joke to lighten up the tense, somber mood.

"It's whatever, bro."

"Ok," Jonah replied as he took Miley's hand and led them off to the cafeteria line to see what was available.

Mrs. Watkins pulled her seat closer to her son as he held his head against the window and stared out of it, absorbing the dark skies, trying to subdue the millions of emotions and crazed thoughts overwhelming him. *Breathe in, breathe out*, he thought to himself, trying to use his mediation skills to control his explosive anger. Mrs. Watkins, not saying a word, rubbed Austin's back in a circular motion and then leaned her head onto Austin's shoulder. "I know you've expressed before in the past that sometimes you have issues with God, Austin, but this is the time we need to really to go to him to see us through this trial."

A few tears trickled out of Austin's eyes hearing his mother's request. "I don't know, mama, I don't know where to even begin with that."

"Here, let me help you…That's why I am here." Mrs. Watkins then took her head off Austin's shoulder and then grabbed Austin's right hand with both her hands. "Look at me…"

Austin slowly turned his face towards his mother's. His reddened

eyes beamed into hers that were just as lava red. She closed her eyes, and Austin hesitantly followed suit.

"Heavenly father, we come before you right now in a dark and trying situation, asking that you come and bring total healing to Myyah's body, oh father God. We ask that you ward off that demon of sickness and infection, oh Father God. Restore her to full health and bring peace and clarity to Austin and everyone else, oh heavenly Father. Father God, we ask that you also forgive those who have done wrong to our baby girl, but we also ask that you give us justice for the wrong being done to our precious Myyah. We know that all things are possible through Christ Jesus. In his name we pray, Amen…"

"Amen," Austin mumbled and then wiped his face free of tears.

"See, that wasn't too bad, now was it?" Mrs. Watkins smiled.

"No…

"See there, I told you praying isn't that bad. You should do it more often. We need it. It's the only thing that helps you get a sense of peace and tranquility, son."

"I meditate from time to time. Learned it in my anger management and conflict resolution class."

"That helps too. Meditate and pray. Anyways, I need to go use the bathroom."

"Ok," Austin replied.

Mrs. Watkins smiled and then got up from her seat. Seconds later Jonah and Miley walked back over. They had two bags of Jimmy John's in their hand along with some fountain cups. "I got you an Italian sub, bruh. And some sweet tea. Oh, and I also got you some chips and a chocolate chip cookie." Jonah sat down at an adjacent table. He opened up the bag and handed Austin a sub along with a bag of jalapeno flavored chips and a big chocolate chip cookie. Miley, still standing, handed Austin a medium-sized, ice-chilled cup and then sat down adjacent to Jonah. "Thanks, man, I really appreciate it."

As the two brothers and girlfriend began to eat, Mrs. Watkins moments later reappeared.

"What a bittersweet reunion. Oh well," Mrs. Watkins exhaled. "Do they have veggie subs, Jonah?" Mrs. Watkins asked.

"That's what I got Mrs. Watkins!" Miley smiled. "Cucumber, tomato, alfalfa sprouts, peppers, lettuce, seasoning, etc."

"Yeah, I can't eat all that pork like these boys do. I'm gonna get me something too," Mrs. Watkins smiled and then made her way over to the Jimmy John's restaurant inside the cafeteria.

After Mrs. Watkins got her veggie sub and the rest of the family finished eating, the entire Watkins tribe spent the rest of the evening huddled away in the vast cafeteria. Not getting any updates yet from the medical staff about Myyah's condition, Mrs. Watkins and Austin

talked about the entire situation and how they planned on trying to seriously wrestle custody away from Fredquisha hopefully if Myyah recuperated. Although everyone knew that Myyah's condition wasn't looking good, Mrs. Watkins was hesitant to succumb to believing in a negative outcome and just had faith in knowing God was going to show up and restore Myyah's body.

Two hours passed. Austin sat back and just stared out of the window, taking in the light traffic that rumbled down the street next to the hospital. He was hoping any second someone would come and give them the greenlight to allow him to go back upstairs to be at Myyah's bedside. Shit, he at least wanted someone to give him updates about Myyah's condition.

"Damn man, like I am so confused…How in the hell is we supposed to get word on Myyah's condition?" Austin asked his mother. "I know…You know what, I'm gonna go find out myself. This is just wrong on so many levels." Mrs. Watkins got up from her seat. "You just stay here. I just don't want any trouble if I run into Fredquisha's family."

"Ok," Austin replied.

"Well, bro. I gotta take Miley back to her crib 'cuz she gotta get to work early in the AM."

"Austin, I'm praying for you and Myyah. I know God is going to pull her through. Just stay positive, ok?" Miley said. Austin stood up and dapped Jonah up and then gave a hug.

"Aiight bro, I'll be right back."

"Ok," Austin said.

As time seemed to slip away, and more thoughts continued to flood Austin's mind, the stress of dealing with the situation was tiring him out. When he was back in jail he was so used to going to bed at around 9:30 PM given his days usually started around 5 AM. His body was getting weary and drowsy, and all he needed right now was just to lay his body down and get some much-needed rest. Although he was still somewhat amped up with anxiety, as more time passed, and his mother still hadn't come down to report on any possible news of Myyah's condition, Austin laid his head down on the table, closed his eyes, and just allowed the drowsiness invading his body to give him some sleep. Hopefully, his mother would come down in a few more minutes to alert of what was going on.

Chapter Forty-Five

"Fredquisha, Dr. Swati would like to speak to you in private. He has some more updates…" Patricia, the nurse, instantly grabbed Fredquisha's attention in the visitor's area, waking her out of a deep nap she very much needed to relieve herself from a tension headache pounding on the side of her head.

"Can I come?" Evelyn inquired, ready to jump out of her seat.

"I guess," Patricia responded.

Fredquisha and Evelyn got up and the both of them together followed Patricia back into Myyah's room. There she glanced at Dr. Swati and another doctor – a tall and slender white doctor with a semi-curly afro – hovering over Myyah engaging in light discussion.

Dr. Swati paused his conversation. "Fredquisha, I want you to meet Dr. Rosenberg. He's the chief pediatric neurologist from the University of Chicago. He and his team are working on an experimental treatment for child patients with significant amounts of brain damage," Dr. Swati explained.

Still numb and confused about the entirety of today's events, Fredquisha just lightly smiled at the older and slender Jewish doctor. Dr. Rosenberg made his way over to Fredquisha and then stuck his hand out to shake her hand.

"Nice to meet you, Fredquisha. As Dr. Swati explained, given the severity of Myyah's condition, there is another possible experimental treatment option we are currently looking at. It involves the placement of embryonic neural stem cells into Myyah's brain."

"Wait, what does all of that even mean?" Evelyn interjected as she inquired with a raised brow standing next to Fredquisha.

Dr. Rosenberg continued, "Well, we would be taking nerve cells from fetuses and then transplanting them inside of areas of Myyah's brain that have accumulated significant damage."

Evelyn scrunched her face up and spat, "Well, how much it gon cost? I mean, we ain't even got the money like that. Will Medicaid even cover it?" Evelyn continued to gripe, "Besides, it's just an experiment. How you even know for sure it's gonna work? My grandbaby ain't no damn lab rat. We want real results."

Evelyn held her arms by their elbows as she rapidly tapped her left foot against the ground. Her somewhat defiant attitude was really beginning to rub Fredquisha the wrong way. MooMoo turned and looked at her mother, "Mama, just leave. Let me talk to the doctors alone. In fact, just go home. You've done enough already today. I'll call you when I get back home…"

"Girl, I ain't goin' nowhere! She my grandbaby too."

"Mama, not now. Please. You're just doin' the most. Just leave."

"Fine. I'm just tryin' to help…" Evelyn looked her daughter up and down with a slight scowl written on her face. She quietly exited Myyah's room thinking of her next game plan since her 'daughter' suddenly wanted to start to act like a mother and shit.

"Sorry about that, doctor…Please, tell me though. Will it work?"

"I can't guarantee anything. It's all experimental. However, if you are willing to give it a try, we just need your permission to begin the treatment as soon as possible."

"Ok. I'll do it. At this point, what else can be done? I mean, if she's almost completely brain dead, I might as well go ahead and do it."

"Exactly. We just need you to sign this release paperwork given us your permission to go ahead and begin the experimental treatments…"

"Ok…"

Dr. Swati handed Fredquisha a clipboard and a pen. She quickly scribbled her signature down at the bottom line without even bothering to read all of the terms and conditions. It didn't matter at this point though – this was God answering her prayer to help Myyah pull through.

"Ok, so we are going to begin treatment as soon as possible. We are going to start the procedure as soon as possible. We are going to get her prepared for surgery now."

"Can I say one last thing to her?"

"Sure," Dr. Swati responded as he stepped out of MooMoo's way and allowed her to saunter over to Myyah's bed. Fredquisha glanced at her daughter and smiled as a tear escaped her eye. She wiped her face and sniffled. She leaned down and planted a kiss on the side of her face. "Please, pull through my baby. Don't die on me. I promise I'm gonna change everything and do better by you. Please don't go…I promise I'm gonna be a better mama." MooMoo then lifted her face up, spun on her feet and quickly made her way out of the room so the doctors could go ahead and scuttle Myyah to surgery.

As she walked slowly down the long, cold corridor she suddenly felt her phone vibrating in her back pocket. Buzz. Buzz. Buzz. She figured it was probably her mother sending her a barrage of text messages. Come to find out once she pulled the phone out of her

pocket and looked at the number, it was Mr. Garrison.

"Hey, Mr. Garrison. Now is not a good time to talk—"

"Why? Where you at? I miss you already. I got some good ass bud from one of my guys…"

"My daughter is in the hospital. Things ain't lookin' too great…"

"Ohhh, damn. I'm so sorry to hear that. You need somethin' from me?"

"Nah, I'm good, Mr. Garrison."

"Well, I need somethin' from you…"

"I'm tied up right now, Mr. Garrison. I can't go nowhere."

"You know I got a meeting on Friday with Section 8."

"Ok, and?"

"Well, the doctors are operating on your daughter, I'mma need you to come operate on me."

"Mr. Garrison, fuck that shit! You taking things too far!" Fredquisha growled in a whisper-like manner as she made her way next to the visitor's area. She didn't want to go back in and sit down given she didn't want everyone in her business.

"Sounds like you wanna be a homeless bitch," Mr. Garrison chuckled.

"Mr. Garrison, please! Can't you understand I'm going through some things?"

"And? We all go through some things. It's called life, bitch. I told yo ass that if I helped you, you gon help me. Besides, I'm going back to the DR in a few weeks anyways. When I leave you can go back to doin' what you were doin'."

Fredquisha paused for a moment, closed her watery eyes and just pondered about once again she found herself in a compromising situation with Nate. She huffed, "Fine, fine, fine." MooMoo opened her eyes and exhaled. "We can't do nothin' at my place 'cuz I got company."

"Shit, well, you need to come slide over to my place then."

"Well, can you order me a ride? I don't want none of my peoples to know where I'm going…"

"Yeah, I got you. Where you at?"

"Northwestern. The Children's Hospital in Downtown."

"Goddamn, that ride gon cost me $30. Pussy better be worth it."

Fredquisha didn't respond.

"Anyways, I'll order this Uber right now. Have yo ass ready in the next five minutes."

"Ok…"

"Call me zaddy…"

"What?" Fredquisha retorted with a scrunched up face.

"Yeah, bitch. Call me zaddy…"

Fredquisha still didn't respond.

"Alright nah…Keep fuckin' with me…"

"Ok, zaddy."

"Good. Seen you soon, you nasty slut." Mr. Garrison, crude more than ever, hung up the phone.

Fredquisha stuffed the phone back into her back pocket and strolled coolly into the visitor's area. "Hey, ya'll. I'm finne head out for a few. Myyah is about to go into surgery and I can't just be here in this hospital anymore."

Donterio, who was chopping it up with one of his cousins, stood up and walked over to Fredquisha. "What you mean, sis? You finne just bail? How long is the surgery gonna even last for?"

"I don't know. They preppin' her right now. It could be a few hours. I just…I just gotta get out of this depressin' mothafucka."

"But damn, sis. What if something happens and the docs need to see you?"

"I'm just gonna be right back. Just stay here for me in case ya'll find out something…"

"I guess," Donterio replied, confused. Why was his sister acting this way all of suddenly? Why was it that important for her to dip out?

Fredquisha suddenly took off and quickly paced herself out of the hospital to await her ride to Mr. Garrison's place.

Some of Fredquisha's remaining family members looked a bit confused, but they took that as their cue that it wasn't even all that necessary to stay behind either. It was already damn near midnight and many of them had shit to do in the morning. Evelyn had already dipped out. Most of them were just there to support Fredquisha.

"You need a ride back home, cuz?" One of the cousins asked Donterio.

"Nah, I'm good, bruh. I'm gonna stay behind 'cuz Myyah about to go into surgery."

"Aiight, boy. Stay prayed up."

"Bet…"

As Donterio said his goodbyes to the remaining family members, he sat down and picked up a magazine. Although a tad tired himself, his care and concern for Myyah was keeping him up. Although it seemed as if now Fredquisha was slowly beginning to turn a new leaf by wanting to change her disposition for Myyah (for what reasons nobody still doesn't know yet), Donterio was the only person from MooMoo's family who seemed genuinely concerned. Evelyn was just worried about her plans getting squandered, and now that Myyah was on the cusp of death, she was already onto her back-up plan – getting custody of Zy'meer and Quimani.

Chapter Forty-Six

Mrs. Watkins anxiously stepped onto the ICU floor from the elevator, ready to get the latest updates into Myyah's condition. Making her way down the long corridor, she passed the nurse's station looking for Dr. Swati.

"Excuse me, ma'am…Can I help you?" Patricia, the white nurse, asked Mrs. Watkins.

Grandma turned her attention towards the young blonde nurse and smiled.

"Yes, I am looking to get an update on my granddaughter's condition. No one has contacted me to give me and my son an update. What's going on?"

"Oh, well, he just got done consulting with the mother and the other grandmother. Do you want to speak to him?"

"Sure…"

"Ok, let me page him." Patricia then picked up the beige phone next to her and dialed for Dr. Swati to come to the nurse's station to speak with Mrs. Watkins. As the anxious grandmother stood idle at the nurse's station, Donterio bumbled his way towards the station.

"Oh, hey…," Donterio uttered as he gawked at the grandmother he barely knew. They'd met before on a few occasions here and there, but never had a meaningful, serious conversation.

"Hey…"

"Don't worry. Everyone else went home. I'm just stayin' here until Myyah gets out of her surgery."

Patricia's eyes widened that Donterio revealed the news. Mrs. Watkins suddenly grew angry. What fuckin' surgery? she thought. The now visibly distraught grandmother looked at the nurse and growled, "Why didn't you just tell me that?"

"It was best the doctor told you those details, ma'am. I'm sorry…"

Donterio interjected, "Look, Mrs. Watkins. I know you ain't gettin' along with my mama'nem, but I just wanna let you know that it was me who tried my best to save Myyah this morning."

Mrs. Watkins wasn't feeling Donterio's vibe. She was thoroughly annoyed – why couldn't this white bitch just tell her the truth? Also,

why was Donterio just standing next to her being somewhat a nuisance? She just wobbled her head and kept staring at Patricia.

"What kind of surgery is she even having?"

"Mrs. Watkins…" Dr. Swati called the grandmother's name, instantly catching her attention.

Mrs. Watkins spun on her heels and scanned the short Indian doctor up and down. "Doctor. Why wasn't I nor my son informed about Myyah's surgery? What's going on?"

"I do apologize. We only consulted with the mother since she is technically her legal guardian. One of my colleagues from the University of Chicago is performing a last minute surgery on Myyah to see if he could help reverse some of the brain damage."

"Wait, what?!? How could you all make such an important life decision for my granddaughter without even at least talking to my son?!?"

"I understand, and I do apologize, Mrs. Watkins. Time was of the essence and we didn't know exactly where you folks were at."

"Ughhh, whatever! What are you all doing to my granddaughter? What kind of surgery is this?"

"Well, we are going to be transplanting some fetal neural stem cells into Myyah's brain. These are cells derived from fetuses. It will hopefully help reverse some if not all of the brain damage done to Myyah's brain. It's an experimental treatment but we are positive it may work."

Mrs. Watkins grumbled. "Well, let me go tell my son. When did Myyah go into surgery."

"We got her prepped about thirty minutes ago. She's currently on the operating table as we speak."

"Oh my god…ok, let me go get my son."

"Mrs. Watkins…" Donterio said.

"Yes," she replied looking at him.

"Just wanna let you know I've been praying for her. Anyways, nurse, where is the bathroom?"

"Down the hall and to your right…"

"Donterio…I'm sorry. I'm just stressed out," Mrs. Watkins apologized, producing a light smile on her face.

"I understand, Mrs. Watkins. I understand. Anyways, my bladder is about to explode. We can talk in the visitor's area if you like…"

"Ok."

~

"Austin! Austin! Wake up!"

Gasp! Austin suddenly opened his eyes and peered at his mother

hovering over him. He wiped his face of slob. “What happened? Is there something wrong with Myyah?”

“No! She’s in surgery right now. I just spoke with the doctor! They are trying a last minute operation. Fredquisha and her crazy ass mama left already. The only person still here is Donterio.”

“Donterio…Why is he hanging out here?”

“I don’t know. I guess he just wants to stay to make sure everything is alright with Myyah.” She grabbed her son’s arm and yanked him out of the seat. “Come on, let’s go up to the visitor’s area! We need to be there to get any updates.”

Grandma and Austin quickly paced their way through the relatively empty cafeteria and made their way to the elevators. Once they got to the ICU floor they went straight for the visitor’s area.

“Sup, bruh,” Donterio said once he saw Austin enter.

“What’s good, homie?”

“Man, praying…I’m so sorry about everything, my dude. I tried my best to help save Myyah this morning. I’m the one who gave her CPR.”

“I appreciate it, bro. I appreciate it.”

“Anyways, look ya’ll. I just wanna let ya’ll know that whatever happens, I’m down to ride for ya’ll. My mama and my sister ain’t on shit. To be honest with you, I should’ve been cut them off, but hey, it is what it is. If ya’ll need anything from me, just let me know. I really wanna stay as long as I can but I got this job interview in the morning. I told Fredquisha I’d stay behind until she got back, but she tweakin’.”

“Where she even go?”

“Man, I don’t know. She just dipped out.”

“Alright, bruh. Don’t wanna hold you up. Go handle ya business and good luck with the interview.”

Donterio stood up from his seat and sauntered over to Austin and his mother. Austin stood up and dapped up with Donterio. Truth be told, Austin kind of liked Donterio, but obviously because there was animosity between him and Fredquisha, for years he kind of had to keep his distance.

“I’m praying for Myyah, for real for real. Ya’ll stay blessed.” Donterio made his way out of the visitor’s area.

Austin sat back down and clasped his hands.

Mrs. Watkins shook her head. “Crazy. I always thought he was a no good ass nigga. Turns out he’s the only one who seems to give a shit about anything from that family.”

“I know,” Austin said. “I know…”

Chapter Forty-Seven

"Ahhhhhhh! AHHHHHHH!" Mr. Garrison screamed in carnal bliss as he blasted his old, thick nut all up in Fredquisha's lubed ass.

Not the pussy. Yes, the ass.

"God damn! FUCK!" the shady and perverted landlord panted, his hard dick still throbbing deep up in Fredquisha's tight anus.

"Damn, nigga. Could you have at least pulled the fuck out?"

Mr. Garrison snickered. "Girl, whatever…" He coughed and then rubbed his chest. "You wanna make a few extra dollars?"

Fredquisha, still on her knees, ass tooted in the air, turned over on her back and looked at Mr. Garrison with curiosity. She was vexed. What the fuck was he talking about?

"What you mean if I wanna make a few extra dollars?"

"Yeah…You heard me…" Mr. Garrison signed with his hands, "DO. YOU. WANT. TO. MAKE. A. FEW. EXTRA. DOLLARS?!? You fuckin' retarded or some shit?"

Fredquisha rolled her eyes. "No. I'm good. I heard you the first time. I'm going back to the hospital. I already told you I got a lot on my plate. My daughter is in surgery right now."

"Stop actin' like you a real mother and what not. I know you don't give a damn 'bout that girl. Yo ass just tryin' to put on a front and shit. You black bitches are so damn predictable, I swear. One day ya'll careless and reckless. Don't know how to raise kids. Next thing you know some shit happens, ya'll wanna act like ya'll motherfuckin' the best mamas on the planet. Maybe if yo lazy nigga ass wasn't runnin' around in the streets yo daughter wouldn't be in the predicament she in now."

Fredquisha's somewhat look of irritation devolved into a look of outright shock and outrage. Mr. Garrison saw her scowl too but he was completely unbothered by the fact he went low and got deep in her skin.

"YO, what the fuck is you talkin' about dude? My damn daughter is almost dead and the doctors tryin' to save her and shit!"

Mr. Garrison smacked his teeth and didn't relent.

"Bitch, shut up. If you were that concerned about ya damn nappy

headed ass daughter you wouldn't be here lettin' me dick you down. Obviously, your priorities are all the way fucked up. Now, stop actin' stupid and make this extra cash. You know you need the loot."

Fredquisha abruptly hopped out of the bed, naked, cum swimming out of her asshole and down her cheeks. She lunged into Mr. Garrison's face, her fists balled up ready to fight, and screamed, "FUCK YOU AND FUCK YO MONEY! I DON'T NEED YOUR MONEY, YOU OLD ASS SLIMEY NIGGA!"

Mr. Garrison was unfazed. He chuckled and licked his lips.

"You done?"

"MAN! FUCK YOU! I'M OUT! FUCK THE APARTMENT TOO! I DON'T CARE IF YOU CALL SECTION 8! I CAN ALWAYS GO STAY WITH MY MAMA! BETTER YET! I GOT PLENTY OF NIGGAS THAT WILL TAKE CARE OF ME!"

Fredquisha scrimmaged Mr. Garrison's bedroom looking for her clothes. She picked her pink pair of panties up off the ground and tried to quickly put them back on. Mr. Garrison moved adjacent to her as she quickly put her pants on. A half-drank bottle of Peach Ciroc was sitting on the nightstand next to his bed. He picked it up and took a huge swig. "Ahhh," he exhaled as the fruit-flavored alcohol swam down his dry throat.

"So, you don't wanna make this cash, huh?" Mr. Garrison said as he held the bottle in his hand. Fredquisha wasn't paying attention. She leaned down to pick her bra off the ground as Mr. Garrison quickly hovered over with the neck of the bottle in his hand.

"NO! SO STOP ASK—"

PLOW!

Mr. Garrison whipped the bottle across the back of Fredquisha's head. Shards and bits of glass flew all over the place. Unaware of what Mr. Garrison had up his sleeves, MooMoo suddenly grabbed the back of her head and then stumbled.

"What the, what the fuck?!?" she muttered and then fell the floor. She used her right hand to cover up the protrusion of blood flowing from the fleshy wound visible in the back of her head.

Mr. Garrison then punted Fredquisha in her stomach with his huge right foot.

"AHHHH!" MooMoo gasped and began to cough.

"Bitch, you think I'm playing games with you?!?" He continued to yell, "I was tryin' to play nice. But I see you must've really forgot who the fuck you dealin' with." Mr. Garrison then swung his fist right in the back of Fredquisha's head, further intensifying the stinging wound.

As MooMoo cried and tried to minimize the pain spreading through her abdomen, it was no match to the intense and agonizing

pounding Mr. Garrison then commenced onto her body, delivering blow after blow. “GET UP BITCH! FIGHT BACK! YOU SUPPOSED TO BE BAD!”

Fredquisha tried her best to stand up to defender herself, but before she could fully erect herself, Mr. Garrison threw another mountainous hard blow into her stomach with his tightened fist. He grabbed her by her shoulders (she had no shirt on) and slammed her into the bed and began to batter her some more to subdue her defense. The crazed landlord quickly scanned the room to locate his pants. He yanked them off the floor, pulled the heavy black belt out of the pants’ belt loops. Forming a makeshift whip, Mr. Garrison lashed MooMoo left and right all over. Her legs. Her back. Even her face. Any part of her body that was exposed received a lashing.

By this point, MooMoo wanted to pass the fuck out. Her head was in spinning, throbbing pain. The wound, still fresh, oozed blood onto the sheetless queen-sized mattress. You’d think given Mr. Garrison lived in a nice condo in suburban Elmhurst he’d at least keep fresh linen on his bed. Nope. He barely called the place home. His real den of luxury he called his residence was his time share in Punta Cana. There he’d deal with no-lip giving, submissive Dominican prostitutes who would’ve been more than glad to make an extra $20 to do whatever he pleased.

With sweat glistening down his face and stubbly chest, Mr. Garrison finished his beating and threw the belt onto the ground. “Now, I’m gon ask you again. Do you want this extra cash?”

“Ye-yeah,” Fredquisha muttered as she wailed.

“Good. Don’t fuck with me ever again. I got this Polish cracka comin’ over who wants a taste of some black pussy. He’s helpin’ me do some work on some of my properties. I promised to pay him fifty percent cash, fifty percent ass. Now, he’s gonna come in here at any minute. I want you to do what you gotta do to make him happy. Suck his balls. Eat his ass. Make that cracka realize nigga pussy is the best thing since Popeye’s Fried Chicken butter biscuits with honey. I’ll slide you an extra $100.”

“Ok,” MooMoo replied.

“Good. We got an understanding. Now go get yourself cleaned up. He should be here in the next fifteen minutes. And go wipe yo ass. You got some shit on my dick…” Mr. Garrison sniggered as he moved his sweaty, naked fat body towards his dresser. "Oh yeah, and fuck yo daughter."

Chapter Forty-Eight

Thursday morning. 6:45 AM.

Pigeons chirped outside the bedroom window of Deontae's new THOTiana. In actuality, her name was Tatiana – a nineteen-year-old mother of two, veteran Popeye's drive-thru window worker and cosmetology student. Her biggest accomplishment to date that she loved bragging about was being able to secure section 8 housing in a newly constructed building on the South Side.

After a night of fucking, the two were nestled away in her queen-sized bed, naked, recuperating from eight orgasms.

Buzz. Buzz. Buzz.

Deontae slowly opened his eyes and looked around. God damn, this is a nice ass muhfuckin' place, he thought to himself, admiring the sheik section 8 apartment his new boo acquired thanks to Chicago Housing Authority. He rolled over and rumbled through his pockets as he heard his phone continue to buzz. He whipped it out of his pants' right pocket and saw an unfamiliar 708 number. Scrunching his face up, he quickly tried to figure out who was calling him. Fuck it. He answered – "Hello?"

Tatiana awakened from her deep sleep and wiped her eyes.

"I did it…" a female voice on the other end declared.

"Did what? Who is this?"

"It's me…Tish."

Deontae's eyes widened. It was Tisha – some chick he got pregnant a while back and had a secret baby with.

"Why you callin' me this early and shit? I already slid you the $300 you said you needed. What the fuck is you talkin' 'bout?"

"I popped that hoe. You said the only way you'd come back to me is if you got rid of the bitch. So, I did it."

Deontae was still very much confused. Two years ago, when him and Tish were deep into their fling, Deontae had expressed to her that the only way he could be with her was if he got Katina out of his life. He said he had too much baggage (long history plus kids) with her and somewhat depended on her for a lot of shit. She retorted and always told him she could take care of her if need be, but truth be

told, Deontae just wanted the pussy from Tisha. Nothing more, nothing less. When she got pregnant, her odd "devotion" to Deontae amped up even more. Every time they'd meet up so he could visit his secret two-year-old son, Deontae Jr., Tisha would beg Deontae to just move in with her out in Romeoville, the far southwestern suburbs of the city. Of course, Deontae didn't want to be tied down to another bitch, so he'd throw every excuse in the book to not take her up on the offer.

"Look, I ain't got time for this right now—"

"I shot the bitch. Gave her two rounds last night. I know that bitch is dead now. So what you gon do?"

Deontae's eyes grew even wider in surprise and anxiety.

"You shot who?!?"

"Katina. That fat bitch you said you was tired of. I got rid of her finally, boo."

Deontae threw the sheets of his naked body and manically paced the floor. "Yo, you got to be fuckin' kidding me right now?!?!?"

"No…I've been following that bitch for a hot minute. I've been watching everything. The night she left. The night you ended up leaving to go over that dirty yellow bitch's crib in Englewood. I even know where you at right now. I told you I was a ride or die."

"Yo, you got to be fuckin' kidding me!" Everything around Deontae was spinning a million miles per hour. The walls were caving in. The lunatic shit he was hearing come out of Tish's mouth was crashing into ears like an asteroid smacking against earth, causing an apocalyptic cataclysm.

"No, I'm not kidding. So, what you gon' do?"

"Man, you crazy as fuck! I ain't down with this shit at all. I know I said I ain't wanna fuck with her no more, but you with the shits. BITCH, GET OFF MY LINE! I DON'T KNOW YOU!"

"Don't hang up on me, Deontae!"

"Man, fuck you bitch! You crazy as fuck!" Deontae hung the phone up and threw it on the pile of his clothes nuzzled next to the bed.

"What's wrong??!?" Tatiana asked, looking concerned like a muhfucka.

"Man, this crazy ass bitch I used to deal with back in the day talkin' 'bout she popped my baby mama. She crazy as fuh. My BM at work right now. I hate it when bitches be playin' games and shit," Deontae growled as he jumped back into the bed and threw the covers back over his naked body.

Buzz. Buzz. Buzz. Deontae's phone went off again.

"This better not be her crazy ass callin' me again." He rolled over and picked it up. The phone number he glanced at was recognizable – it was his nigga Pac from the set. "Ay yo, waddup, G?"

“Yo, my dude, you heard about your baby moms?”

Deontae’s pupils widened and the whites of his eyes shown fretful redness.

“Nah, what the fuck happened!?!?”

“Yo, someone popped her ass last night in front of her mama’s crib, joe!” Joe is a term Chicago niggas used to refer to one another.

“WHAT?!?!?” Damn, Tisha wasn’t lying. This psycho bitch really laid his baby mama out, he manically thought as he bounced out of the bed again.

“Yeah, bro! She ain’t dead though. Word out in the streets is they sayin’ you had somethin’ to do with it! Everybody been tryin’ to hit yo other line, but you wasn’t answerin!” Pac was referring to Deontae’s other cell phone he used more so to communicate with regular folks. The phone he was on now, a burner, was used to cell dope and he also used it to talk to his side bitches, so only a few had the number. His “main” phone was left downstairs in his car.

“Fuck, fuck! What hospital she at?!? You know?”

“Man, I don’t even know. But from what I heard she in serious condition. Shit, they probably moved her to a different hospital and shit.”

“FUCK!” Deontae screamed. “I need to find her! I ain’t have shit to do with this!”

“Man, you sure bro?”

Deontae scrunched his face up. “Nigga, am I sure?!? NIGGA, YES I AM SURE! WHY THE FUCK WOULD I WANNA POP MY BABY MAMA AND SHIT?!?!”

Tatiana, staring at Deontae, shook at every word that came out of his mouth.

“Aiight, damn, just calm down broski. I just wanted to see what the fuck is up! I knew you ain’t do that shit.”

“Man, whatever. Let me hit you back…”

“Aiight, bet. Hit my line.” Pac hung up.

“Yo, shorty. I gotta go. I’m holla…”

Tatiana, a bit scared, looked at Deontae and mumbled, “Ok, just call me later…I hope everything is alright.”

“Yeah, I’m cool. Just some crazy shit.”

Chapter Forty-Nine

Thursday Morning. 6:57 AM.

Beep. Beep. Beep. Beep.

The non-stop chirping of the EKG machine inside of a University of Chicago Hospital ICU room blared. Air flowing from the ventilator pumped life-giving oxygen into Katina's lungs as she lay in a medically induced coma. Tubes ran through her nostrils. And IV bag slowly dripped the strongest dosage of morphine to subside the pain that overtook her body.

Streams of cold air blowing from the AC vent inside the room wrapped around Mattie, Katina's mother, making her mood all the more somber as she stared onward at her motionless daughter fighting for her life.

Dr. Rampsarard, the emergency room physician, closely examined Katina's vitals. With his lips pursed on his dark brown slender Indian face, he turned his attention towards Mattie as she sat in the corner silent. He exhaled and gave her the look. The all-too familiar look that registered the possibility of hopelessness. It was good to have a glimmer of hope, but by the heavy and low look on the doctor's face, Mattie just knew things weren't looking too good.

"Well, ma'am, we are still keeping her in a coma, but Katina lost a lot of blood. She has some reduced kidney function. Also, one of the bullets pierced her liver. There is the possibility she might need a transplant."

"Oh, my, god..." Mattie lowered her head as tears swam in her eyes. Luckily, the kids weren't in the room to hear the somewhat dreadful prognosis. "So, what are the next steps?"

"Well, we are searching for a donor as we speak. But with the way things are looking, if we don't get a donor by the end of the week, there is a great chance that Katina won't make it," Dr. Rampsarard explained.

Mattie couldn't fight holding back her tears and screams anymore. Her cries of angst filled with the room, echoing even outside the doors and onto the already depressingly cold and grief-stricken soundless ICU floor.

“Don’t give up hope though, ma’am. I am gonna fight hard to make sure we find a donor in time. I am gonna do my best to make sure she gets that transplant.”

“Ok…,” Mattie replied. She propped herself up from her seat and made her way out of the room. She needed the space and the warmth of sunlight to inject her with some energy. The last twenty four hours was beyond tiring and now that she was on the verge of losing her only child, she needed to quickly come up with solutions. But not just solutions to figure out how Katina was going to find a liver transplant. But solutions on how she was going to get justice for her daughter.

Earlier she had spoken with a detective from the Chicago Police Department about possible suspects. She had told Detective McNulty that Deontae was probably the prime perpetrator behind the attempted murder. She told him the very reason why Katina was staying with her was because she grew tired of Deontae’s incessant infidelities coupled with his tiring, low life-ish ways. The icing on the cake was when Deontae threatened her at gunpoint, which inevitably prompted her to go seek a protective order against him. But to no avail, that didn’t happen. However, so far, with no real evidence implicating Deontae in the possible murder plot and so far no sign of his whereabouts, the police were taking their diligent time to make moves against him.

Detective McNulty said he was going to send some of his guys out to go look for Deontae and bring him in for questioning. But with scant circumstantial evidence and the possibility, of course, Deontae would deny any involvement once they interrogated him, the Detective told Mattie to prepare for a protracted investigation.

This, of course, is not what Mattie wanted to hear. Deep down in the base of her motherly soul, she just knew Deontae was the one. Who else would it be? Katina had no other significant spouse in her life. No bitter or jealous ex-friends. As far as she knew, Katina wasn’t sleeping around with another woman’s man. All signs definitely pointed to Deontae. Detective McNulty assured her he somewhat felt the same, but the ‘system’ needed to work in order to verify and already presumed conclusion. Again though, this isn’t something no parent wanted to hear. Mattie wanted immediate justice – Deontae needed to be got already. Even if he didn’t necessarily pull the trigger, his antics led to this fate.

Making her way outside while a few relatives looked after the kids in the visitor’s area, Mattie found an empty shaded corner. She needed a cigarette. She scrambled through her pursue, pulled out a pack of Virginia Slims and slapped a square into her mouth. Once she lit up the cigarette, she took two long pulls and blew the smoke from her nostrils. She then pulled out her cell phone and dialed up her cousin

Terry.

Terry, aka, Fat Terry, was a triple OG Four Corner Hustler gang chief from back in the day. Although he wasn't as heavily involved in the gang anymore, he still had a clout and pull on the West side city streets.

The phone rang. Seconds later – "Hey, cuzzo! I ain't heard from you a minute! What's good chica?!?" Terry laughed, not knowing what had went down over the last twenty-four hours.

"Terry…" Mattie replied somberly. "Katina got shot."

"What?!?" Terry's somewhat elated disposition turned into volcanic anger. "Is she ok?!?"

"Well, yeah, for right now. She's in a coma. She need a liver transplant."

"You've got to be fuckin' kidding me!?! Who the FUCK tried to kill my kinfolk?"

"Her baby daddy. This no good ass nigga named Deontae?!?"

"WHAT!?!? That clown ass nigga!?!? I told her ass years ago to drop that fool!"

"I know, but that foolish part of her was too afraid to let go of garbage and now she gotta pay for this shit."

"Nah, fuck that. I'm gonna make his ass pay for this shit. So what you want me to do?"

"Do what you gotta do."

"Don't say a fuckin' word, kinfolk. I'm on it. That nigga fucked with the wrong family."

"Thanks, blood. I'll have to pay you back."

"Don't even worry about it. This what family supposed to do. Go back and look after my baby cousin and let her know I got her back. Give me a call if anything changes and if she gets better."

"Ok, I will."

"Aiight, cuzzo."

Mattie hung up the phone and finished her cigarette. Her eyes turned to vengeful slits, fully aware of what was going to ensue now that she got her family deeply involved in this drama.

She put her cigarette out and blew the remaining smoke out of her mouth. Once she made her way back into the hospital and to the visitor's area of the hospital, she informed her grandchildren and a few relatives of Katina's need for a transplant. They prayed, but as they prayed, Mattie plotted and anxiously waited for Deontae's assumed inevitable demise. This fuck nigga had to pay.

Chapter Fifty

Early Thursday Morning…7:31 AM

"Austin! Wake up!"

Austin's eyes widened and glanced over at his mother who had her attention thrown straight ahead at Dr. Swati standing solemnly in the visitor's area.

"Oh, damn, I'm sorry," Austin apologized. He didn't know how long his mother had been trying to wake him up or how long Dr. Swati had been standing there.

Dr. Swati didn't say anything in response. He was quiet. Ghastly quiet and his eyes locked onto Austin.

"Is the entire family here? Myyah's mother?" Dr. Swati asked.

"Nah, she ain't come back yet," Donterio replied. He too was now awake.

"Any news?" Austin asked, wiping his eyes free of sleep. Since Myyah was in surgery all the family could do was anxiously wait, pray and then hopefully get some sleep in the visitor's area.

Dr. Swati made his way close to Austin and Ms. Watkins. He closed his apparently heavy eyes, took a small inhale of breath and then and huffed, "Myyah's gone, Austin…"

"What?" Austin's eyes widened and he stood up from his seat.

"I'm so sorry Austin…She passed away at the tail end of the procedure."

"Wait, what the fuck do you mean she passed away? My daughter is dead? My baby girl is dead?"

"Yes, I am so sorry Austin…"

"HOW THE FUCK DID THIS EVEN HAPPEN?!?!?" Austin cried, his shrieking filling the entire visitor's room.

"Shhh, shhh, Austin, calm down, son, it's gonna be ok!" Mrs. Watkins quickly stood on her feet to quickly console her son. Although she was overwhelmed with grief herself, she could tell by the growing violent tone of Austin's voice that he was about to break down and possibly go crazy. And the last thing she wanted Austin to do was to make a sudden move against the doctor.

Doing her best to hold Austin back Mrs. Watkins clutched her

mouth and her eyes turned to squints as tears streamed down her face.

The doctor took a step back and continued to explain, “During the procedure, no matter what we tried, Myyah’s condition just kept getting worse and worse. We tried everything in the books to stabilize her vitals, but nothing worked. It seemed as if her body couldn’t handle the stress of surgery given she was already in such bad shape. Once again, I’m so sorry. I’ll alert our grief counselors to come and speak with you all…”

“That won’t be necessary, Dr. Swati. I appreciate it, but it won’t be necessary.”

“Ok, well, as I said, I truly apologize. If you all like, you can go to her room to go be with her until her funeral arrangements are made.”

“Ok…”

Donterio, silent, with a few tears streaming down his face, walked over to Austin and leaned in to give him a hug. “Sorry, bruh. I’m so sorry for all of this. I wish I could reverse time. This shit is fucked up, bruh.”

Austin closed his eyes and rocked back and forth. “NOOOO! NOO!” he screamed.

Mrs. Watkins tightened her embrace around Austin as he continued to scream. “Come on son, we gotta be strong. Baby girl would want that, ok? Let’s go see her now. I know this is painful, but we gotta keep strong.”

“Mama, I can’t. I can’t live. My baby is gone. My baby is gone. I can’t get it together,” Austin stammered as his frame quivered.

“Shh, shh, shh, I know, son. But please, don’t say that. You gotta be strong for everyone else, including me,” Mrs. Watkins cried as she dragged Austin out of the visitor’s area.

As Austin and Mrs. Watkins left the visitor’s area and made a slow, long and painful journey to Myyah’s room, he couldn’t bring himself to see his baby girl lying motionless in the bed, her life quickly snuffed away from her.

Feet away from the room, Austin damn near collapsed.

“Come on, son. Please, don’t do this…”

Once they got to the door of Myyah’s room, Austin’s eyes were blinded by a flood of tears. A myriad of emotions oppressed his soul. Mrs. Watkins and Austin entered the room and intensely stared at the now lifeless Myyah. Austin once again damn near collapsed to the ground but Mrs. Watkins managed to keep him up.

One of the nurses who was in the room preparing Myyah’s body and decommissioning all of the machines in the room looked over at Mrs. Watkins and Austin and said, “I’m so sorry about all of this. My condolences go out to you and your family. I believe a grief counselor on site is on their way if you need someone to talk to. Other than that,

I will leave you all to have your time. Again, I am truly sorry and may God give you peace in this trying time." The Latina-looking nurse then pursed her lips and patted Austin on his back and then proceeded to make her way out of the room.

"Ohhh, baby girl," Austin muttered as he made his way closer to Myyah. With no more pipes or tubes running in and out of her mouth or nostrils, she looked like she was sleeping peacefully.

Austin picked her small, brown hand up and gently rubbed it. Mrs. Watkins then walked over and rubbed the side of her face. "Oh, my precious granddaughter. I cannot believe this happened to you…"

Chapter Fifty-One

A week later…

The Watkins family was slowly escorted into the vast, relatively filled Church by one of the funeral home directors. As everyone in the congregation took to their feet to welcome in the family in mourning, the organist and church pianist played a typical black gospel melody to hopefully damped the mood a bit.

Numb, confused, bitter and angry, Austin still couldn't wrap his mind around how he everything just suddenly got to this point. This didn't have to happen. He kept telling himself that over and over again since her passing. Her death did not have to happen. Had the State did a timely investigation, Myyah would be very much alive right now, in his arms, playing at a park or going to get ice cream on this beautiful Saturday mid-morning. Instead, here he was, a father grieving over a daughter he never really had a thorough chance to develop a relationship with.

As Austin, dressed in a black suit, held firm onto his grief-stricken mother, they slowly sauntered down closer and closer to the lilac and blue mist colored open casket. It was the perfect color to match the custom lavender princess dress Myyah had on.

Each footstep Austin took, the closer he got to the casket, the more he couldn't handle seeing his baby girl lay up in that casket. From afar he could see her soft yet stiff brown face along with her slender torso with her hands resting delicately on top.

Austin gawked over to his right and already saw that Fredquisha and his overly large family's presence were nestled comfortably inside the church. Fredquisha herself, instead of being dressed in normal and usual conservative funeral attire, was wearing a basic white blouse, some business casual pants, and some run-down pumps. You would've sworn the bitch was going to a job interview at a local mall, not the funeral of her own damn fucking daughter.

Seeing her and just how drab she looked intensified Austin's rage. But instead of letting cavalier attire and presence keep him dismayed, he continued to meditate in his head, allowing the young gospel soloist now softly humming Yolanda Adams' "The Battle Is Not Yours"

to carry his mind away. He had to because truth be told, Austin for the last few days was on the absolute get on the verge of killing somebody. Myyah didn't need to be in that casket, Fredquisha's ass belonged in there he reasoned. The bitch was absolutely worthless – her and her entire family. The only exception was Donterio because unlike the rest of the ratchet family, Donterio was the only who seemed to operate with decency and common sense.

It was completely fucked up too because after Myyah passed away, Fredquisha never showed up to the hospital to be by her bedside until the funeral home took in her body. She stayed away from the hospital – her and the rest of the family…Except for Donterio of course. Donterio also acted as an emissary between his family and Austin's. What made Austin even more enraged was that Fredquisha didn't even have the decency or respect to offer to help cover the funeral expenses. She told Donterio to go back and tell Austin and Mrs. Watkins she was absolutely broke and couldn't afford nothing more than a simple funeral home service and cremation. The Watkins family, of course, refused to let Myyah be funeralized in such a cheap manner, so, without hesitation Mrs. Watkins offered to cover the entire funeral expense. She felt as though her baby girl, her one and only precious granddaughter Myyah, deserved a princess-like homegoing.

As Austin and his mother got close to Myyah's casket, they both broke down in synchrony, their wails filling the church. Jonah and the rest of the other siblings surrounded Austin and Mrs. Watkins and did their best to console them. Austin took one last glance at his beautiful daughter, leaned down and planted a kiss on her forehead and rubbed her cheek. "I love you, Myyah. You're gonna be alright, ok? You're gonna be alright. God's got you now. Oh, my baby. My beautiful baby…You look so beautiful," Austin cried as he continued to delicately rub the side of her face.

Austin's breathing picked up and his heart raced. Out of the corner of his eye, he could see Fredquisha staring off into nothing in particular. Some knock-off Gucci shades adorned her face as she held a funeral program in her hand. Her legs were crisscrossed and her just sat there, silent, motionless, in her seat as if she were attending the funeral of someone else's child. Her nonchalance and indifferent state of emotion were driving Austin even more crazy. But again, nonetheless, he had to do his best to make sure that on this day he can remember his baby girl and do away the sickening thoughts of murdering his child's mother. Finally, the Watkins clan was escorted to their pews inside the church and the service began.

New Faith Baptist Church was a medium-sized megachurch located right in the heart of Matteson with a congregation of about a thousand

people. However today, no more than two hundred people were in attendance for Myyah's funeral. Most of the people here with family members, friends, and a few church congregants. As the Pastor of the church began to officiate the funeral, one by one, people were invited to the podium to give their remarks about Myyah's life. Teachers, neighbors and a few other people got up and said kind remarks about the girl and how much she meant to everyone. Towards the latter half the ceremony, right before her casket was to be closed, another song was going to be sung by the church's soloist to coincide with the 'crowning' of Princess Myyah.

The soloist, a young light-skinned girl with microbraids closed her eyes and began to pour out her heartful lyrics to the slow melody emanating from the church organ and piano.

"…I shall wear a crown
When it's all over
I'm going to put on my robe
Tell the story how I made it over
Soon as I get home
I shall see His face
When it's all over…"

One of the funeral home workers slowly made his way down the aisle towards Myyah's casket. Taking his time, taking deliberate step after step, he held firmly onto a pillow in which Myyah's princess crown, the same one Austin and Mrs. Watkins gifted her just over a week ago, rested on. Everyone in the congregation stood to their feet, shouting, holding their hands up in their air as they knew that fateful moment arrived. Baby girl would be crowned the heavenly, angelic princess she now was and her casket would be closed forever. As the funeral home worker made his way to the casket, Austin, Mrs. Watkins, Donterio and a few other stood to their feet and made their way to the casket. Austin, tears streaming down his face, observed the funeral home worker delicately fix the crown onto Myyah's head. As the soloist intensified her singing, Austin's heart pounded ferociously because he just knew at any second the lid to the casket would be closed and this would be the last time he would ever see his baby girl ever again. Mrs. Watkins then stood to her feet and held Austin, just knowing he was on the verge of collapsing.

Now was that time…The funeral home director sauntered over to the casket, pulled out a device used to lower the inside panel of the casket holding the body. He inserted the screw-driver like device into a tiny hole on the side of the casket and lowered Myyah's body deep into the casket. Another funeral home director then took a few pink

roses adorning the casket and inserted them in between Myyah's hand. That same funeral director then took the outside linen and carefully tucked it into the inside of the casket. She then gave Austin, Jonah, and Donterio a slight nod. That was her signal that they should then lean in, place their hands on the side of the top-half casket lid and slowly lower it until it sealed shut. The three men followed suit and as the casket lid inched closer and closer, Austin trembled and let out a huge wail.

"NOOOO! GOD! PLEASE, GOD! NO! PLEEASE!" he screamed.

Mrs. Watkins tightened her embrace around Austin and rubbed his back. "I know, son. I know. God's got her now. God is in control."

~

After leaving the church, a solemn procession of about thirty cars made their way from the church out in the south suburbs to Oak Woods Cemetery on the City's south side. With three police motorcycle escorts leading the way, the long caravan of mourners banded together as they flowed through traffic, slowly journeying to the vast historic cemetery located right in the heart of the Greater Grand Crossing neighborhood.

After thirty minutes of trekking through light traffic on the expressway, the entourage arrived at the vast gates of the cemetery. With two local Chicago police motorcycle escorts first pulling in, the cream-colored Cadillac hearse pulled in and made its way in as the rest of the entourage followed. Once they arrived at the burial site covered in a green tent, Austin along with his brothers and another cousin, got out of the family limousine and then made their way to the hearse so they could carry Myyah's casket towards the plot.

Mr. Barrett, the funeral director, got out of the passenger side of the hearse and then opened the back of the hearse. Mr. Barrett leaned into the back of the hearse, slid Myyah's casket out and from there Austin and his family carried the tiny casket over to the plot's lowering setup.

Family members, relatives, friends and others who knew Myyah drizzled their grief-stricken bodies into the tent, crowding around each other. Austin and his immediately family sat down on the seats as more mourners surrounded the family to begin the burial's last rites and rituals.

Mr. Barrett, the tall, elderly and incredibly dark-skinned funeral director who had a full head of curly white hair, scanned the entire group of mourners and began to recite the last rites before the lowering of Myyah's casket.

"Well, Beloved, we have come literally to the last mile of the way.

You can't go any further than this when you are made of flesh and blood. We were with Myyah when she breathed, and we were with her when she took her final breath. But you know, the concern isn't with our departed young sister. The concern is with us – the living. Our young sister is now in another world, a world much larger than what we can imagine. A divine world. God's world. But for those of us who remain, the living, we have a task not to be concerned with those who have left us but to be concerned with those who are still among us. All of us, from the youngest to the oldest still here today, should stop hurting one another and love one another. We are family. And if we can make that commitment today then Myyah's living has meant something even beyond herself. Let's remember the grieving families now. Their days will be filled with sorrow. We must understand they have given up a portion of themselves. Anybody can stand with them today, but days from now, we must be reminded of their grief, and pick up the phone, call them up and say, 'I just called you up to say I love you and I am still here with you, and I mean it from the bottom of my heart'. And now, FOR AS MUCH as it hath pleased Almighty God, in his wise providence, to take out of this world the soul of our deceased sister, we therefore commit her body to the ground; earth to earth, ashes to ashes, dust to dust; looking for the general Resurrection in the last day, and the life of the world to come, through our Lord Jesus Christ; at whose second coming in glorious majesty to judge the world, the earth, and the sea shall give up their dead; and the corruptible bodies of those who sleep in him shall be changed, and made like unto his own glorious body; according to the mighty working whereby he is able to subdue all things unto himself. Amen…"

"Amen," everyone lowly responded at the close of Mr. Barrett's recitation.

The same funeral home attendant who passed out flowers to the family moments ago then leaned into Mrs. Watkins' left ear and instructed her they can now proceed to place the roses on top of Myyah's casket. Mrs. Watkins got up from her seat and placed the rose in her hand onto the casket. Austin and the rest of the family did the same.

Three Mexican cemetery workers then proceeded over to the plot and began to unhinge the casket so it could make its slow six-feet passage down into the freshly dug grave. Sobs within those in attendance intensified. The reality of Myyah's death sunk deeper into Austin's mind and he couldn't hold back anymore. "My baby girl is gone!" he uncontrollably sobbed, throwing his fists in the air, fighting the invisible demons that were trying to devour his newly found redemption.

“It’s gonna be ok, baby…She’s watching over us now. She’s now our angel…” Mrs. Watkins consoled as she rubbed Austin’s back. As much as Austin wanted to believe everything his mother was saying, he couldn’t. He just continued to shake his head. The total shock and disbelief of Myyah’s death was just still very overwhelming and rupturing to his soul. A part of him was now slowly getting covered with dirt. From that moment as the cemetery workers began the process of enclosing the casket into its vault, Austin’s soul was no more. A blank cloud of darkness inoculated him and all he could think about was inflicting pain. Murder. Once again, he looked out the corner of his eye and observed just how fucking nonchalant and cavalier Fredquisha was. This bitch had to die he reasoned. She had to go sooner rather than later.

Richard, one of Jonah’s best friends, days ago had agreed to sing one last song before everyone left the grave. He made his way from the crowd and greeted everyone. “To the Watkins family, you have my deepest condolences. At the request of my best friend and brother, Jonah, this is for our angel, our princess.”

Richard cleared his throat and began to harmonize…

“Like a comet
Blazing 'cross the evening sky
Gone too soon
Like a rainbow
Fading in the twinkling of an eye
Gone too soon
Shiny and sparkly
And splendidly bright
Here one day
Gone one night
Like the loss of sunlight
On a cloudy afternoon
Gone too soon
Like a castle
Built upon a sandy beach
Gone too soon
Like a perfect flower
That is just beyond your reach
Gone too soon
Born to amuse, to inspire, to delight
Here one day
Gone one night
Like a sunset
Dying with the rising of the moon
Gone too soon

Gone too soon.”

Chapter Fifty-Two

Three weeks later…

Usually Sunday evenings after church, Mrs. Watkins would make a huge southern dinner for her and her kids. Everyone would come over, sometimes even friends and distant cousins, just to laugh it up and have a good time around some good home cooked food. Mrs. Watkins tirelessly and studiously slaved away in the kitchen, wanting to make sure all of her cooking was perfected. A huge black cauldron of collards boiled on the gas stove. In fact, collard greens were her fave to cook every Sunday. She had a special recipe she got from her grandmother. The recipe made Mrs. Watkins leave her house every Friday and go into Downtown to get fresh pork neckbones along with spicy hot sausage from a butchery in Fulton Market. The sausage was used to cook jambalaya or dirty rice. This afternoon, aside from the collard greens, Mrs. Watkins had four cheese macaroni and cheese baking in the oven. On a counter top, a spread of crispy pieces of fried chicken cooled off on a pan. Three buttery pound cakes cooled off on an adjacent counter.

Despite the aromas of southern comfort floating in the air, Mrs. Watkins was still grieving from Myyah's loss and she was slowly doing her best to get over the sudden and unexpected death.

"Hey, Austin! Dinner's ready!" Mrs. Watkins beckoned Austin to come downstairs and eat supper. "Everyone is gonna be on their way soon," she continued.

Austin, hearing his mother's call from his room upstairs, didn't suddenly bust a move to get ready to get his grub on. He himself was still frozen and bitter knowing his baby girl was gone forever. It is said that time heals all wounds, but it was going to take an eternity to heal the one gaping in Austin's heart and mind. And that wound, well, he was at the point where he felt there was going to be nothing to heal it.

Actually…

He did have his mindset on what could be therapeutic, but he was deliberating back and forth as to whether or not it would be the right healing for his broken soul.

Since Myyah's death, he had been fighting hard not to breakdown

and succumb back to his dark ways. Every second, minute and hour was an intense struggle, and as time progressed Austin found himself conjuring up thoughts of homicide.

Austin, laying in his bed, eyes glued to the slowly moving ceiling fan blades, slowly rubbed his abs. While he was in jail he learned the art of meditation by a yoga instructor who volunteered her services to the detention center. It was a part of teaching inmates anger management and conflict resolution. But fuck all of that anger management bullshit. Austin's baby girl was gone out of his life, and the person who he knew was completely responsible for her death was her no good, trifling ass bitch of a mother, Fredquisha.

Not responding to his mother's call, Austin slowly got up from the bed and made his way to his closet. He slipped on a pair of jeans, his Jordans and then threw a black hoodie on. He quickly dashed into his bedroom's bathroom, washed his face and hands and then dashed downstairs.

"Mama, I'm finne head out for a few…I'll give you a call later, ok?"

"Damn, son! I just made all of this food and you just about to bounce? Everyone is literally coming over any second now!"

"Yeah, sorry mama, I just need to just clear my mind, that's all. I'll be back soon, I promise!" Austin then reached in, planted a kiss on Mrs. Watkins' cheek and quickly made his way out of the house.

Chapter Fifty-Three

"…Be encouraged no matter what's going on
He'll make it all right
But you gotta stay strong
I know right now it's impossible to see
But God is gonna work it out if you just believe
Remember this one thing while you're going through
If God delivered Daniel, He'll do the same for you…"

William Becton's "Be Encouraged" lowly blared from the car's radio. With salty rivers of tears still pouring from his reddened eyes, Austin continuously took swigs from a bottle of E&J. He'd already smoked three big ass blunts back to back. Completely gone and numb, deep down he just knew there was no other real reason to keep living. Myyah was his reason, and now that she was gone he truly wanted to be dead too.

As the slow and somewhat melancholic gospel music continued to play he stared down at a picture of him and Myyah the night of the Daddy-Daughter dance. He continued to weep as more and more tears streamed down his face, mixing in with the sweat gushing from his wide brown brow. "Oh, Myyah. I can't keep living. You were my only reason for trying to change. Why God? Why?!?" Austin slurred and then took another swig from his drink.

The sun was beginning to set. Mrs. Watkins sent Austin a few text messages back to back asking him if everything was alright and if he'd planned on coming back home. He lied and assured her that he was, but the reality was that he was ready to kill Fredquisha. That bitch had to die. Her blood needed to be poured out into the streets.

Austin opened up the glove compartment and whipped out a gloc. He loaded it with a full clip and then tucked it into his waist. His eyes turned to slits, and he wiped his nose free of sweat and running snot.

For the last hour or so, Austin had been parked on a street right across from Fredquisha's apartment. He had spent so much time debating what he was about to do, but now that his mind was made

up, he was ready to go guns a blazing and kill everything in his sight. He got out of the car and slowly meandered across the street. Just as he was about to reach the main entrance, a cream-colored Cadillac pulled up to the side. Two big ass goonish niggas, both wearing doo rags and leather jackets, plopped themselves out the car and looked around. It was like these niggas were double-checking to make sure their surroundings were safe of anyone who might be nosey. One of them spotted Austin and scanned him up and down. He opened up his jacket and pulled out a big ass Desert Eagle. His eyes turned to those familiar slits, easily suggesting to Austin he better mind his business and move the fuck on.

"I suggest you get lost, partnah," the big goonish nigga growled, showing off the gun that obviously was loaded and ready to be used.

Austin didn't say a word, he just quickly spun on his feet. Despite alcohol and weed mixed in with rage and confusing running through his system, Austin sobered the fuck up and made his way back to his car. Actually his mother's whip.

"Fuckkk," Austin mumbled as he quickly hopped back into the car, started it up and sped off. "Who the fuck them niggas was??!?" he said to himself as he barreled down the street and around the corner. He pulled over to a side parking spot. He thought to himself for a second and couldn't help but think those niggas were going into the apartment building to fuck someone up. The street nigga inside of Austin said, "Nigga, mind ya business and go back home." But the inquisitive and investigative nigga retorted with, "Go check this shit out. Just stay in the cut."

Austin swung the car right around the corner and rather than parking directly across the street from Fredquisha's apartment entrance, he parked a few cars down, still able to have clear sight of the two goonish niggas standing idly. They were still scanning the area. Probably waiting for someone Austin presumed. Then Austin saw a familiar face…His mama's cousin's ex-husband -- that crackhead Glen.

Glen quickly strolled up to the two dudes, looked around and then dapped up with one of them. Austin then observed one of the dudes slide Glen a manila envelope. The crackhead maintenance man then quickly opened the door and three them disappeared.

Austin continued inside the car to wait to see what was about to go down next. Some moments later he heard loud screams emanating from the building. He couldn't immediately discern who was screaming, but it sounded like a mix of a man and a woman. The screams got louder, and by the raspiness of the screaming woman's voice, he could it tell it was Fredquisha.

Austin got out the car and ran towards the side of a car closer to

the entrance of the building. He ducked and peered up towards Fredquisha's apartment. His anxiety ran high. His hands quivered as he held his composure leaning against the car.

POW! POW! POW!

Fredquisha screamed again, this time louder and more pronounced. Austin could hear her beg for her life.

POW! POW!

The screams were no more.

A minute later the two men came bursting through the entrance, looked around and then quickly hopped in the Cadillac and sped off down the street.

Hyperventilating and trying to get a control of his rapid heartbeat, Austin still ducked himself behind the car waiting for the crazy scene to clear. He then stood up and quickly ran back to his car, started it up and took off. He didn't want to be on the scene if and when cops arrived.

Epilogue

A year later…

Time, as it was said before, surely does begin to heal all things. For Austin, since Myyah's death and oddly enough the murder of Fredquisha, he was able to slowly move on with his life. Not a day went by where he didn't think about his daughter. He missed her every day. Her smile. Her laugh. Just her very presence, although two years went by where he barely saw her.

But as time moved on, and his spirituality and sense of life's purpose deepened, he realized that things happened for a reason. As tragic as things may be when they happen in our lives, indeed they happen for reason. Sometimes we are given the privilege to understand the reasons, sometimes not. But when we don't understand, at least at that moment in time, we have to just lean on God's understanding since he is the one who ordains all things to happen. That was the way Austin saw it and now believed it. With that being said, Austin, after getting released from jail, started school and set his eyes on getting his degree in construction and real estate development.

It's funny how Karma, divine intervention, etc., (whatever you want to call it) has a way of showing you your purpose and what God has in store for you. The day when he went to go possibly kill Deontae and then kill himself, had not those two men been there to stop Austin dead in his tracks and making him leave, God knows what his suicide would've triggered. Just more heartache, more pain, more devastation for so many people who deep down Austin truly loved. And for that, that was a huge lesson for Austin to learn. Yeah, bad shit happens, but bad shit happens to everyone. And just because bad shit happens to you doesn't give you the right to then make more bad shit happen for everyone else.

That early evening when Fredquisha was killed, she had been helping Deontae to hide out from both the police as well as the rumored hittas who were after him. Unfortunately for Fredquisha, she didn't know Deontae was also hiding out from the hittas and had she known that she probably would've never kept him in her apartment. However, keeping Deontae there served her well for the time being.

She still got good dick, good weed and most importantly, she was able to use Deontae as a deterrent to stop Mr. Garrison from taking advantage of her.

Nonetheless, the two unidentified men, with the assistance of Glen the crackhead, killed Fredquisha and Deontae in retaliation for trying to kill Katina. Fredquisha, unfortunately, had to go because she was collateral damage and the two men didn't want any identifying witnesses. They couldn't risk it and didn't any anything to come back and get Katina nor Katina's mother in trouble.

Speaking of Katina – within days of getting shot, she was able to get her transplant. Within three months she was fully rehabilitated and back to working and finally was making the courage to enroll in school. The same school as Austin…

~

"Yes, can I get a spicy chicken sandwich, extra pickles, and a large fry?"

Austin was standing in line, ordering a chicken sandwich from the Chick-Fil-A restaurant inside the student cafeteria. It was ritual for him to come here right after his 2 PM class to grab a bite to eat and then spend the next two or three hours studying.

After getting his food and sitting down, he went straight into his books and spent the next hour or so studying real estate finance. He took a sip from peach lemonade ice tea and slapped a fry in his mouth. With his eyes glued to the complex mathematical formulas, he steadily took notes.

"Fuck!"

Suddenly looked up and saw a woman, Katina, slip on her ass and spill her food tray all over the place. She too had gone to Chick-Fil-A and ordered a meal. Food and drink spilled everywhere. Katina, slightly moaning and looking disappointed, was still on the ground trying to pull herself up and minimize the embarrassment.

Austin closed his book and quickly went to go help Katina off the ground.

"Damn, let me help you up. You look like you took a huge fall there," Austin said and smiled as he helped Katina off the ground.

"Shit, damn it…I was looking forward to that too. I just spent my last $10 on that meal and can't eat until later tonight when I go to work!" Katina complained and shook her head. "Oh, well. Thank you, sir."

"No worries…Sorry about that," Austin responded.

"Oh, don't worry about me. I'm pretty sure you have enough worries in the world. The last thing you need to do is worry about

me."

Austin paused for a moment and took in Katina's humble and infectious smile. There was something about her, something inviting. Something angelic. He couldn't quite put his finger on it, but he wanted to probe deeper.

"Well, let me get on my way. I probably didn't need that chicken anyways," Katina laughed.

"Here, let me treat you. I'm not trying to flirt with you or anything, I swear. But I feel bad seeing as how you wanna eat something and you gotta jet off to work soon."

"No. No, you don't have to do that."

"Listen…I don't mind. Besides, I can use another chicken sandwich myself. I can take down five of those."

"Hahaha, really? You got an appetite!" Katina snickered. Seeing Austin's smile and his desire to help her was really messing with her head. It had been a while since someone had shown genuine non-sexual interest in her, especially a black man.

The nurse and now student thought about it for a second. "Sure, I don't mind. What's your name anyways?"

"Austin…You?"

"Katina."

"Nice to meet you," Austin said as he extended his hand.

"Nice to meet you as well." Katina extended hers, and the two shook hands. They walked over to the Chick-Fil-A counter and they proceeded to order their food. After they got their meals they walked back over to the table where Austin still had his stuff. They chopped it up for a few moments, exchanged numbers and went their separate ways.

~

"Hey mama," Austin said as he made his way into the living room. Mrs. Watkins, as usual, was in her living room doing yoga to a DVD she had popped in moments earlier.

"Oh, hey son! How was school?"

"It was good…Same ole, same ole. Getting ready for this big exam."

"Oh, well that's good. When you get a chance, you got some letter from some law office."

"Ok," Austin replied and then went into the kitchen and saw his mail neatly stacked on a counter.

He rummaged through a few letters, throwing away mostly junk mail in an adjacent trash can. Finally, once he got to the letter his mother was talking about, he opened it and scanned it.

Reading it word by word, his heart almost came to a complete screeching halt.

"WHAT THE FUCK!?!?! ARE YOU FUCKING KIDDING ME?!?!?"

Mrs. Watkins stopped her yoga poses and quickly ran into the kitchen. "What's wrong? What happened?" she asked, somewhat out of breath.

"This has to be some sort of goddamn fucking joke!"

"Austin, baby, please, tell me what's going on?"

"Fredquisha's mama got a fuckin' lawsuit going against the hospital for medical malpractice. She's suing them for $10 million, talkin' 'bout they botched the surgery and shit with that experimental drug or whatever. She won the mothafuckin' lawsuit, but I am next of kin, the courts were about to give me half of the judgment. BUT, this bitch is challenging my paternity, stating that I am not Myyah's biological father!"

"WHAT?!?!?" Mrs. Watkins' screamed.

"YES! READ THIS SHIT!" Austin handed his mother the paper. She quickly scanned its content and immediately clutched her chest in surprise. She gasped and looked up at Austin, and her look of surprise suddenly turned into a look of disgust.

"Austin, wait, I am so confused. What the fuck does she mean you are not the biological father?!?!? Didn't you all take a DNA test to even prove paternity from the get go?!?!"

Austin paused for a moment.

He never did a DNA test. He never challenged paternity over Myyah from the get. He'd always assumed she was his biological daughter, no questions asked.

Mrs. Watkins closed her eyes and exhaled. She lowered her head and shook it. "Austin, please, baby, please tell me you took a paternity test."

"No, mama. I just assumed she was mines. I mean, she looked just like me. What the fuck!?!?"

"Oh, God!" Mrs. Watkins kept shaking her head as she held the letter from the law firm that was coordinating the medical malpractice lawsuit. She glanced back down at it again and saw that they were requesting Austin to come to court next week and submit to a court-ordered posthumous paternity test.

"This is so fucking unreal. Austin, please, this cannot be real. I am just. This is just too much. I don't feel well, call 9-11. I think I'm gonna pass out," Mrs. Watkins screeched as she held her head and damn near collapsed to her knees.

~

The following week…

"In the case of The Estate of Fredquisha Pierce vs. Northwestern Children's Memorial Hospital, will the plaintiffs and defendants please rise. The Honorable Gary Truman is presiding," the burly black court bailiff announced.

On one side of the small courtroom were attorneys representing the hospital. On the other side were attorneys representing Evelyn.

Evelyn and the rest of her family were attendance in the courtroom, quietly awaiting what the judge was about to say. Donterio wasn't present. After Myyah's passing, he had enough of dealing with his mother and decided to move out of Chicago for good. He met his now fiancée and was attending vocational school down in Orlando while working as a mechanic at an Enterprise Rent-A-Car at the airport. Fredquisha's two boys weren't present either. Both of them were staying with their fathers. As for Quantaysia, right before Fredquisha was murdered, she paid the girl to get an abortion behind her mother's back.

Austin, Mrs. Watkins and the rest of the family were huddled away in the courtroom too. With his eyes concentrated on the Judge, he just knew at any moment the judge was going to summon him forward to do a DNA test right then and there. Austin and his mom had hired a lawyer to represent them. One of the things they were confused about was how the court was going to conduct some sort of paternity test given that Myyah was long gone. Turns out, the hospital still had fresh blood samples from Myyah that had been refrigerated for experimental purposes. It was also one of the reasons too why the University of Chicago along with Northwestern were found liable for medical malpractice. They used Myyah as a guinea pig for an experimental stem cell treatment that had not been FDA-approved.

"Is Mr. Austin Watkins present today?"

"Yes, your honor," Austin proudly stated as he stood up.

All eyes were on him.

"Can you please approach my bench?"

"Yes, your honor."

Austin, decked out in a grey Armani suit, made his way towards the front. He could feel the gawks coming from Evelyn's family crawling down the back of his head and neck. He approached the judge, no smile was present on his face.

"As you understand, Mr. Watkins, the Estate of Fredquisha Pierce is making a paternity challenge. They dispute you are the biological father of Myyah Watkins. Although you were listed as the biological father on the birth certificate, if indeed it does turn out true, based on a court-mandated paternity test, that you are not the biological father, you understand that you will not be entitled to half of the judgment

awarded to the estate of Myyah Watkins, correct?"

"Yes, your honor. I am completely aware. My attorney informed me of everything."

"Ok, good. Bailiff, can you please hand me the results of the DNA test?"

The bailiff handed the judge a manila envelope, and he quickly scanned the results. With his lips pursed, he got to the end of the document and then looked at Austin.

"Well, unfortunately, sir, you are not the biological father of Myyah Watkins. According to the test conducted by LabCorp, there is 100% chance you are not the father."

Light oohs poured from the people sitting inside the courtroom.

Austin lowered his head and shook it. A few tears trickled down his eyes as he tried to fight back rage.

"I'm so sorry, sir. I know this is devastating news. I know there is nothing the court can do in order to provide solace in this situation."

Mrs. Watkins and the rest of the family were in total shock and disbelief. Mrs. Watkins was crying her eyes out in silence, absolutely shocked at the news. The girl, who for so many years was her precious granddaughter, after all, wasn't hers at all. It was all one big lie that Fredquisha probably knew of but was too arrogant and deceitful to let Austin know the truth.

Evelyn, on the other hand, had a look of joy plastered across her face. The bitch looked like she was ready to run out the room and announce to the world she had just won the lottery, and indeed she did now that the judge was on the cusp of handing over $10 million to her.

Light chatter and laughs filled the room, obviously coming from Evelyn's family members and friends.

"Can I please ask the conversations and laughs to cease. This is an important matter," the judge explained. "A matter in which I am on the verge of handing over a $10 million judgment to a family that seems more concerned with receiving a large amount of money than the emotional state of this man who was lied to for years. While in any other circumstance I would've ended this case right here and signed over the judgment, I cannot in good conscience do that. Ms. Gonzales, can you please approach the witness stand?"

"Yes, your honor…"

Suddenly, deep from within the crowded courthouse, Ms. Gonzales, the social worker who dealt firsthand with Myyah's DCFS case rose from her seat and quickly made her way to the witness stand.

"Thank you, Ms. Gonzales. I am going to ask you a series of questions in regards to the DCFS investigation you conducted last year

when Myyah Watkins was still in custody of Fredquisha Pierce, along with the grandmother on a temporary basis. Please, thoroughly recount all of which you witnessed along with a summary of findings DCFS found before Myyah Watkins' passing…"

"Yes, your honor."

Austin, who by now, was back in his seat, looked very confused as to what was going on. However, on the other side, the look on Evelyn's face wasn't that of confusion. It was one of shock and disgust. Was this judge about to play her for a fool?

Ms. Gonzales laid it all out. She gave a thorough recount of the entire investigation that was conducted last year. She talked about the living conditions of Evelyn's apartment, the negligence of now the retire DCFS caseworker Shirley McGill and the initial police report filed by Mrs. Watkins at the Matteson Police Station. She testified that before Myyah's death, she convinced her director to go ahead with giving Mrs. Watkins court-ordered temporary custody over Myyah but by then it was too late. She rolled out an extensive case and based on her research on Fredquisha's past, along with written testimony from her former landlord, Mr. Garrison, that Fredquisha was unequipped to be a mother. After she spilled the tea, laying out a case against Evelyn and Fredquisha, she made her way back to her seat.

"Well, it is the decision of the court based on the findings of DCFS that I cannot in good faith erase the assumed paternity of Mr. Watkins. Although based on the paternity test it is well established that Mr. Watkins was not the biological father, the fact remains that DCFS was on the verge of pushing custody to her grandmother, Mrs. Watkins. I should also note that even if Mr. Watkins was the biological father, I would still transfer the judgment to him and his family rather than the Pierce family. DCFS and the State of Illinois clearly didn't do their jobs and in this instance, the State and DCFS would be facing serious litigation. Therefore, I hereby award the entire $10 million judgment to Austin Watkins and his family. That is all."

Austin's eyes widened even absolute surprise. Mrs. Watkins and the rest of the family looked at each other. What in the fuck just happened, Austin thought to himself.

"Austin, baby, Austin! Did you hear that?!?!?"

"Wait, so I'm confused…They are giving me $10 million??!?"

"YES!"

"AHHHHHHHHHHH!" Mrs. Watkins screamed. "BUT GOD! BUT GOD!"

~

A year later…

“Baby girl, seems like you had a big purpose. A much bigger purpose than all of us could see. I miss you so much. You are on my mind all the time. Although it turns out you were never mine from the get-go, none of that matters. I still love you like my own, and you will always be near and dear to me in my heart.”

Austin, standing directly in the front of Myyah’s headstone, leaned down and dropped a single pink rose on her grave. He kissed the tips of his hands and then planted his fingertips onto the top of the headstone. He looked to the open blue skies and smiled.

“Everything has a reason, I guess. I hope you are watching all the cartoons you want in Heaven,” Austin laughed as he wiped some tears from his cheek.

“I’m sure she is,” Katina said as she wrapped her arms around Austin. “I’m sure she is watching them all, over and over again.”

Austin looked over at Katina, now his wife and then looked down at her belly. She was five months pregnant. Austin and Katina had hit off big time, and it only took Austin ninety-three days to realize Katina was god-sent. So, he proposed.

“It’s so crazy how you were the same nurse that tended to her bedside. Man, God is crazy yet awesome.”

“Life is strange like that.”

“Strange and beautiful.”

The two of them embraced, kissed and then walked away from the grave holding hands. They approached Austin’s black Rolls Royce, hopped in and quietly took off.

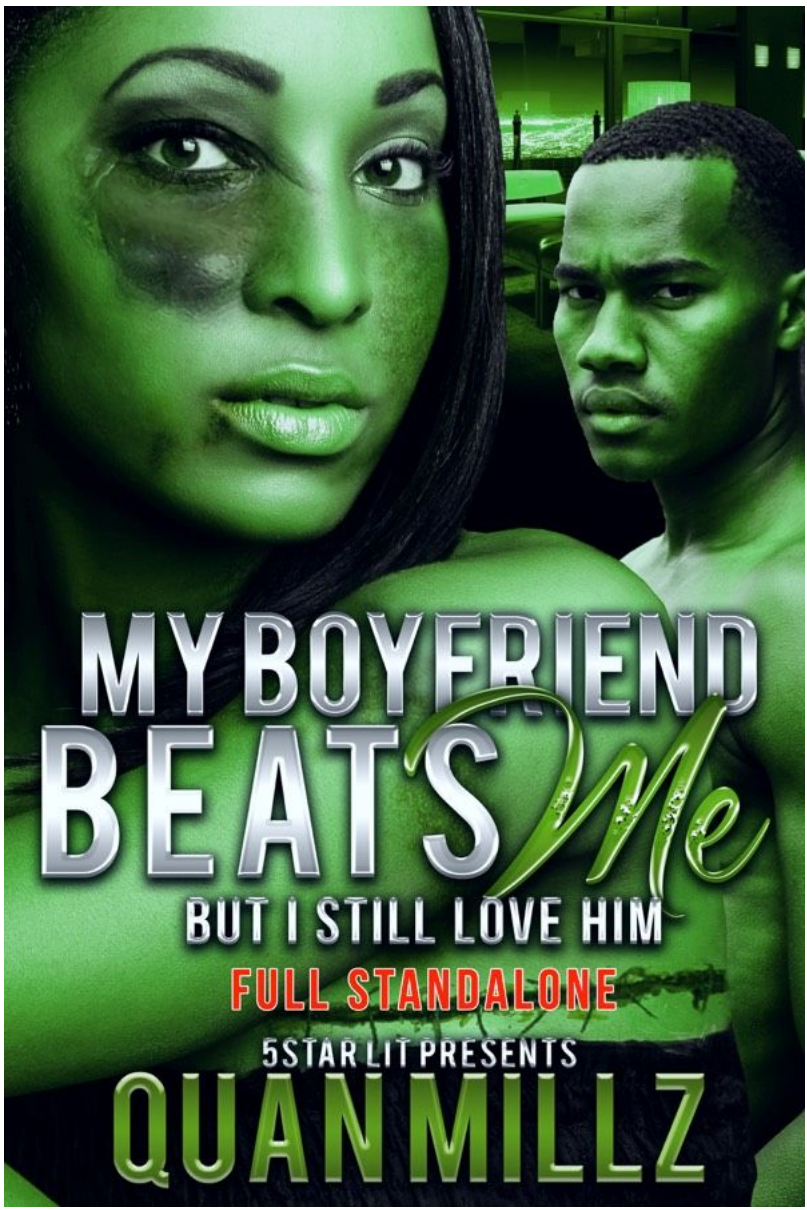
After graduating from college, Austin used a portion of the judgment to immediately start his own real estate empire. He poured his money into rehabbing dilapidated houses and apartment buildings all throughout the South and West sides of the city. He also started his own nonprofit foundation, setting up basketball camps, mentoring programs and other afterschool activities for troubled youth. Katina decided not to continue on with getting her master’s in nursing. Instead, Austin gave her money to help start and manage a low-income clinic all throughout Chicago. Out of the kindness of his heart, Austin, who forgave Fredquisha and Evelyn for all they did, and also realize his complicity in the situation, did give some money to Evelyn to help her move into the apartment building in Hyde Park. He also hired her to help manage a few properties throughout the neighborhood. She forgave Austin, stopped smoking, lost weight and eventually started attending church services with Mrs. Watkins.

Austin’s ordeal, his quest to save his baby girl, taught him one valuable lesson. A lesson anyone, regardless of race, socioeconomic status, gender, culture, sexual orientation, etc., should learn. Love thy neighbor. He couldn’t in good faith take the judgment and not at least

help Evelyn and the rest of Fredquisha's family. He didn't have it in his heart to be that crude and one-dimensional. And so, for Austin's forgiveness of everything that transpired and his desire to move forward, for Austin's pulsing desire to see beyond everyone's flaws as so many people saw beyond his, he did his best to make sure everyone had a chance to get things right before it was too late. Too late before another girl, or even boy ended up like Myyah. She was an example, and all we need is one sacrificing example to know we should learn to love one another.

-THE END-

My Boyfriend Beats Me But I Still Love Him



Prologue

“BITCH! YOU REALLY GOT ME FUCKED UP! ALL THE WAY FUCKED UP! YOU GOIN' THROUGH MY SHIT??!?! WHO THE FUCK YOU THINK YOU ARE?!?” Derron’s sudden, violent growl matched his hard pound on the dining room table inside his condo. Dishware on the table clinked.

"YOU THINK YOU GON TRY TO EXPOSE ME, YOU RETARDED ASS BUM ASS BITCH?!?” The visibly angry boyfriend's diabolical tone echoed throughout the posh condo, instantly terrifying his girlfriend.

Of course, the woman was very much terrified and paranoid. Her entire 130-pound slender body jumped in her seat at the dining room table.

The petrified girlfriend didn't anticipate this reaction. She thought she was going to catch him off guard and expose him for the liar she now knew he was. But suddenly that mindset changed. She was scared and didn't know what was going to happen next.

She quivered as she threw a terrified gawk at Derron. She closely monitored his movement, awaiting what he was going to say or do next.

Derron didn’t say anything though; he grew silent, taking deep breaths through his wide nostrils. His unblinking, hazel eyes devolved into oppressive slits and they glued to the woman's shuddering form.

Lethal silence entered the dining room. Laughs pouring from a rerun of Martin blaring from a flatscreen in condo's den filled the air.

Each second that passed felt like an hour to the scared girlfriend. She now could hear her own thoughts of dread. *Please, God, please don’t let him hurt me, please don’t let him hurt me*, she silently prayed, hoping her higher power would simmer down her boyfriend’s rage. Her disquietude was fueled with the uncertainty of Derron’s next moves. Now that the cat was out the bag, she just simply wanted the truth. Nothing more, nothing less...Then she'd be able to move the fuck on from this psycho. However, had she known her prying would lead to Derron's sudden rage, she would've just left the accusation alone and kept life moving.

Derron’s breathing was hard and rapid. His nose flared like a dragon as he continued to stare at her. He let out a small growl and

uttered, “You really, really, really got some mothafuckin' nerve, you know that."

The woman sat at the table scared and unresponsive. Then she mustered up the courage to say something. "Did you fuck her? That's all I want to know, Derron...," she mumbled, tears trekked from the pockets of her eyes, swimming down her cheeks.

“IF I DID, IT AIN'T NONE OF YOUR FUCKIN' BUSINESS!" Derron howled, pounding on the table once more. Dishes clinked, this time louder.

The girlfriend jumped at the thunderous sound and let out a slight wail. She gazed at Derron.

Derron continued to stare back at her with his eyes now widened.

“Well, if that's the case then, then what's the point of all of this? You lied to me...,” she confessed, stammering her words.

Derron’s eyes reverted to slits. And by his vicious look, it was more than obvious he wasn’t feeling her words. Not at fucking all. He didn’t say anything back to the woman. Silence overtook him again.

Tonight, Derron’s look was different though. His stare was just… different. Was this a murderous gaze engineered into Derron’s face? *Girl, please, run! RUN NOW! This nigga is going to kill you!* The woman's intuition sent her a stern warning, but the warning to flee was just too risky.

"Bitch! I didn't fucking lie to you! I always kept it a buck with you and now this is the shit you gonna pull on me?!?! Let me guess, that slutty ass so-called friend of yours told you she saw me."

“Derron, please, I just wanna know the truth. Please just tell me if you're still messing with her. That's all I want to know...But if this is the reaction you are going to give me, then I think I should just leave,” she grumbled as she slowly lifted herself from her seat.

"Nah! FUCK THAT! Where the fuck you think you goin'?" Derron questioned, his tone very much still deep and thunderous, matching the pouring rain outside.

As she shook her head, she responded by saying, "Out of here. Where else would I go? You said what you said, Derron. There's no need for us to continue this relationship...Goodbye."

"NO, BITCH! You ain't goin' NO FUCKING WHERE! Sit your ass the fuck down and explain to me why you think you had the fuckin' right to go through my shit?!?"

The still-terrified woman was frozen in place as she took a deep inhale and then exhaled. "Because...," she said and took a deep breath and continued by saying, "I needed to know. I refuse to give myself to a man who thinks it's okay to lie about his past and current relationships. If I would've known you were still so enamored with this woman, I would've gotten what I needed out of you and left you

two to carry on."

Nervousness still blanketed her facial expression but she had to say what she had to say if she was going to move on. Derron had his issues, and she was willing to help him through them, but she'd be damned if she was going to be a side bitch to another bitch.

Derron sat in his seat still silent, taking in what his girlfriend just said. She was barely two inches off her seat when Derron stopped her. Frozen for a moment, she peered into his eyes and saw how menacingly serene he was.

Derron was still wordless. He tightened his face and gave her that 'look'. That look she once again registered as his seemingly murderous premeditation.

“Get what you needed from out of me?" Derron then asked with a furrowed face.

Finally, she was ready to make a cautious exit. She said, "Yes...And on that note, Derron, have a nice night and life."

"BITCH, I'MMA KILL YOU!" Derron screamed as he suddenly grabbed a full plate of food set before him off the table and lunged it at the woman. “AHHHHH!” she screeched to the top of her lungs, quickly ducking and avoiding the plate. With the way Derron through that plate, that shit could've cracked her skull wide open instantaneously, killing her.

Before she could raise up and make a possible run for cover, Derron had already dashed out of his seat and yanked her down to the ground. He delivered a nonstop barrage of slaps to her face, and for a brief moment she blacked out.

"DON'T! YOU! EVER! GO! THROUGH! MY! SHIT! AGAIN! YOU UNDERSTAND ME, BITCH?!?" Derron growled at the top of his lungs. At each word in his command, he delivered a blow to his defenseless girlfriend's face.

She was resigned and unresisting on the dining room floor but some natural and impulsive semblance of self-defense made her throw her arms up to mitigate the hard slaps.

“GOT ME ALL THE WAY FUCKED UP!” Derron roared. All of a sudden, he stopped his brutality. "I thought yo ass was different but it seems like you just like the rest of these stupid ass bitches!" Then, without hesitation, he threw his hands around her slender throat and gripped her trachea, squeezing as hard as he could to cut off oxygen from her lungs.

He glanced up and saw a dinner plate on the table. He grabbed it and smashed the plate of steak and brussel sprouts into her face. “Wit-cho non-cookin' ass! Choke on this nasty shit you tried to feed me! GET THE FUCK UP!”

Luckily, smashing the plate on her face didn’t break her skull. Just

a minor, inch-long gash ran across her forehead. Some blood appeared, but it mixed in with the brown steak gravy now covering her face.

She attempted to get up and run away. But the nausea of anxiety mixed in with the beating suddenly made her weak, so she vomited all over the floor.

“GO TO THE FUCKING BATHROOM AND DO THAT SHIT!” Derron screamed, knocking her down to the ground despite her attempt to get up.

Without hesitation, he began dragging her down the hallway and into the bathroom. He grabbed her off the floor and threw her into the bathroom and slammed the door shut.

Dizzy, weak and in pain, she managed to prop herself up off the ground and crawled over to the toilet. Shivering, she grabbed the lid of the toilet, lifted it up and instantly vomited in it. The vomiting came to a pause, but she could feel more contents from her stomach rise.

The woman sobbed as excruciating pain incarcerated her slender body; the same delicate and sensual body she’d often use to put her boyfriend in a state of bliss.

The door to the bathroom flew open.

“MAN, YOU KNOW WHAT! I’M JUST GONNA FUCKIN’ KILL YO ASS RIGHT FUCKIN’ NOW!”

“NO! Please! NO, DERRON! DON’T KILL ME, PLEASE!”

Chapter One

"Hey, girl! Where you at?" Alexandria, Lacey's longtime bestie, asked her over the phone.

It was six pm. Lacey was just getting off work as usual.

Today was one of the worse days of Lacey's career. She was a senior copywriter for Latham Associates, Chicago's first and only black advertising agency. She'd just learned her firm lost one of their biggest clients which meant she was on the verge of losing her job.

"Child, I just hopped in the car. Ughhh! I'm so fucking exhausted," Lacey complained after sighing heavily.

Lacey just heard the devastating news not even an hour ago and she had to dip out as soon as possible to not let it get to her. Now, Lacey was sitting in her raggedy ass Honda in a parking garage. The feeling of being so bleh overcame her. Half of her mind was trying hard to focus in on work, the other half was ready to give up. Honestly, ready to quit and move onto something else.

"What's wrong, chica? Everything alright?" Alexandria further inquired.

"Long story, but we just found out RadioOne went over to Markham Digital and now Doug is thinking about doing a round of layoffs," Lacey said shaking her head, doing her best to massage away a growing migraine pulsing on the side of her head.

"SHIT!" Alexandria roared. Her screeching gasp just made Lacey's headache even worse.

Lacey and Alexandria knew each other from college. Although they weren't blood-related, they were definitely sisters in every sense of the way. They met in their freshman year at Howard University in their English 101 class.

Both young ladies grew up in Chicago, though they went to different high schools. Lacey was from Hyde Park on Chicago's South Side. Alexandria grew up in Edgewater on the city's northside.

After the two besties met and kicked it off, a year later they both pledged AKA. After they graduated from college, Lacey ended up landing a job as a copywriter and Alexandria landed a job working as a social media coordinator for a furniture company.

Lacey stuck it out with the agency and eventually became a senior-level copywriter. Alexandria, on the other hand, eventually found a job working as a marketing director for a small tech start-up company in Downtown. Shit, now from the looks of it, Lacey may have to ask her bestie for a possible job recommendation with the way her CEO was talking earlier.

Lacey exhaled into her iPhone just thinking about the unexpected bad news. Was the job market even good? Would her resume stand out and command her the salary she thought she deserved? These were all anxious ruminations running through the copywriter's head.

“Well, girl, just let things play out. You never know…I mean, you ARE the senior copywriter. Usually, with layoffs, companies get rid of the entry-level talent first, girl,” Alexandria explained. She'd been in a similar situation before and wanted to assure her everything would be alright. "Don't fret about it, sis."

That was what Lacey liked about Alexandria. She was a consoler-in-chief. When bad or crazy things as such happened, Alexandria always had a way of looking at the positive.

Lacey, on the other hand, well, she considered herself a realist. When shit seemed like it was going south, she always felt it was necessary to prepare for the worse. So, tonight, once she got her worried ass home, she was going to take her behind straight to indeed.com and CareerBuilder to start looking for new gigs. Ain't nobody got time for the bullshit, she thought earlier.

“That’s true,” Lacey replied. “That’s a good point, but still…I don’t know. Doug even said that lately our sales have been down and that if we don’t nab a big client by the end of the quarter, the entire agency just might shut down.”

“Damn, well, don’t be so negative about it. Just take it day by day."

Lacey exhaled and rolled her eyes. She truly appreciated her bestie's optimism but she couldn't just fathom the positive just yet.

“Well, anyways, did you forget about tonight?" Alexandria inquired. She, too, was sitting idle in her car having the conversation.

And just like that Lacey forgot Alexandria wanted her to tag along with her to go check out this new gym over in the Gold Coast, east Downtown off Lake Michigan. Lacey's job was all the way out in Bucktown, so it was going to take her at least a good thirty minutes to get to the gym. Considering how thick traffic was around this time, the commute could take longer. Rush time in Chicago was definitely no joke despite the city having the second-largest mass transit system in the goddamn nation.

“Oh, shit, girl! I forgot!" Lacey smacked her forehead. "I had my bag packed and everything. I’m so sorry,” Lacey quickly apologized

knowing that this was something Alexandria had planned for a minute.

“Noooo! Come on, Lacey! Girl, you know I already told you this gym is hard as hell to get into. Girl, I sat on this waitlist for nearly two months!”

“Damn, okay. I’m on my way now!" Suddenly, Lacey chucked on her car’s engine. “What time does the class start again?” she asked.

“Seven PM! You still all the way out in Bucktown?” Alexandria asked. Anyone could pick up on her slight irritation.

“Yeah."

“Girl, please, just do whatever you gotta do to get here quick! I’m already here. Parked and everything!”

Lacey and Alexandria continued to chat over the phone while Lacey made her way out of the parking garage and onto the busy city street. Bumper-to-bumper traffic lined the infamous Milwaukee Avenue in the young, hipster neighborhood where Lacey worked, but Lacey knew how to maneuver through the backstreets to make it toward the expressway. Once she got on the highway, she morphed into Danica Patrick and raced toward Downtown and then to the Gold Coast.

Alexandria told Lacey this particular gym was known for its crazy boot camp classes, so perhaps after the class she'd be so exhausted to not think about work woes. If not, she had a big bottle of red wine and some weed waiting for her back at her apartment.

~

"Fuck!" Lacey groaned when she glanced down and saw 6:35 tick-tocking on her faded car clock. She thought she'd get to the gym quicker but an accident delayed her by a good seven minutes.

She pulled her piece of shit car into an almost-filled parking lot of the Downtown luxury boutique gym. 'BeastCORE' beamed from bright, futuristic-looking neon orange signage on the standalone building. Lacey was worried that she was late and didn't want to further piss off Alexandria. So, she quickly reached back, grabbed her already packed duffle bag (courtesy of her spotty gym routine) and sprinted into the parking lot looking for bestie.

Alexandria told her she was waiting in her Beemer. Yeah, her job actually was paying her a nice salary. Over $150,000. Alexandria was making some serious boss moves.

Lacey always felt in competition with Alexandria and wanted to get on her level. She often contemplated about going back to grad school to get an MBA. However, she was reluctant given that she was still paying off student loans from undergrad. Don't get it twisted

though, Lacey wasn't a jealous or envious type of person. She was rooting for Alexandria all the way in her career endeavors. She just wished she lucked up on the same opportunities.

Swiftness in her feet, Lacey sauntered through the almost jampacked parking lot looking for Alexandria's car. She grinned once she recognized the flashy, brand new black BMW 750 iL Alexandria purchased some months ago...in cash. Yes, bestie was rolling like that.

Although the BMW's windows were tinted, Lacey could see her friend smiling as she looked down at her phone in the palm of her hands. Lacey knocked on the driver's side window, catching Alexandria off guard. If one would've seen Alexandria walking down the street, you would've sworn she was Ayesha Curry's twin. She had the biggest hazel green eyes that paired well with her honey complexion. The biggest dimples were etched into her cheeks.

Alexandria got out of the luxury sedan and said smiling, “Finally, girl! I was getting nervous for a second! Thought you got into a car accident or somethin'!"

"Sorry, girl, you know this damn traffic sometimes is unpredictable," Lacey apologized but with a slight chuckle.

"Girl, don't even worry about it. It's all good. Shit, we still got time anyways. I was just getting nervous because sometimes these classes fill up so damn quick and you have to check in fifteen minutes prior."

"Oh shit! Why you didn't text me and remind me?" Lacey asked.

"Girl, I got caught up and just assumed you already knew. Anyways, let's go inside before these other bitches take our spot!"

The friends gave each other a warm, tight hug and then quickly made their way inside the gym.

~

Lacey and Alexandria were in the women’s locker room, changing into gym attire in haste. So far, from what Lacey could tell, this gym was one of a kind.

BeastCORE was a three-story building standing by itself in the posh lakeside Downtown neighborhood. On the first floor was big daycare still filled to the brim with toddlers and other elementary school-aged children. A pro shop that made smoothies, organic juice and sold gym apparel and merchandise was right around the corner. The main exercise floor along with an array of classrooms were on the third. There were so many other amenities the gym offered that Lacey felt like she was somewhat out of place. And that was because as Lacey got dressed, she couldn't help but notice the uptightness and smug looks on most of the women's faces inside the locker room. Although most of the women were white, all ranging in ages, there were a few

other black women in the locker room, too.

Lacey worked out here and there, so she didn't have a dedicated gym wardrobe. She put on an old “Franklin Family Reunion” t-shirt and some faded black leggings. Some two-year-old off-brand kicks she purchased from TJMaxx adorned her feet.

As Alexandria was getting ready herself, she couldn't help but notice how drab bestie looked. "Ahahah, girl, you look like you about to work out at the Planet Fitness on 47th street!" Alexandria laughed as she scanned Lacey up and down, taking in the faded family reunion shirt loosely covering Lacey's frame. She definitely wasn't feeling what she presumed was a raggedy ass outfit.

"What's that supposed to mean?" Lacey asked with a raised brow.

"Girl, we at a high-end gym in Downtown and you came here looking like you about to go workout with Uncle Ray Ray and Cousin Pookie who just got out of prison," Alexandria chuckled as she shook her head.

Lacey smacked her teeth and said, "Lexy, girl, we are at a gym. Not a nightclub. Girl, you doin' the most!"

Lacey noticed Alexandria had a face full of light makeup on. Her slightly judgmental eyes skimmed bestie up and down and saw that she was wearing a sports bra matching some tight leggings.'

Lacey leaned forward and said, "So, who is he?"

"What you mean?" Alexandria asked, once again caught off guard.

Lacey knew her friend and knew that she had a habit of trying out new places or going to different events just to meet new dick.

"Girl, you turned yourself into a thirst trap. So, who is he?"

Alexandria smacked her teeth. "You must've not done any research on the gym..."

"Ughhh, no... Why would I though? It's...a...gym. Girl, you something else!

Alexandria nippily looked around and got quiet. She shut the door on the small-sized black gym locker in front of her and then locked it with a combination lock. She leaned into Lacey's presence and said, "Girl, the owner of this gym is fine as fuck! His name is Derron Harrington. You never heard about him? He was even on Windy City Live last week!"

"Nah, girl. I don't keep up with local news like that."

"You should...Anyways, you'll see what I mean when we get out there."

"So, wait a minute. You mean to tell me you dragged me to the gym just to holler at a nigga?" Lacey shook her head and slapped her locker shut. "I should've known. You do this to me every time. Why can't you just stick with Match or Tinder?"

Alexandria scrunched her face at the sound of hearing bestie would

even dare suggest she succumb to dating lames off the internet. "Girl, eww, no. All of those bums on there. Girl, I'm trying to get with someone with purpose and potential. Not STDs, bad credit and secret children."

Lacey snickered and shook her head. "Come on, girl. Let's go. I swear you crazy as hell."

"Good, 'cuz I was about to rush your ass! I'm ready to get my future husband!"

The two BFFs made their way out the locker room and to the classroom where the boot camp was going to be taught. Moments later, the two besties walked inside. They had about a good five minutes to spare before the start of the class.

Lacey took in the thick crowd inside the classroom. She then realized Alexandria wasn't lying or exaggerating. The class was already filled to the brim with women. Light chit chat about weddings, exhausting jobs, bad sex and local Chicago news filled the room. The two women found an empty nook in the room carried on with their conversation.

Chapter Two

"FUCK! Fuck, fuck, you suckin' the shit out of that shit," Derron groaned, eyes rolling to the back of his head like he was having a massive seizure. His mouth hung wide open in delightful, dick-sucking bliss as he sat back in his office chair inside of his office at BeastCORE Studios.

Aside from the distant thumping of hip hop music coming from an adjacent boot camp classroom, all that could be heard at the moment in his office was the slurping sound being made on his hard, veiny dick.

"You like that, huh?" Adrianna, one of his assistants, purred as she continued to devour his dick in the nastiest way. Her own slobber coated her mouth along with Derron's throbbing shaft. This was the type of head game Derron needed in his life at the moment. Perfect relief from all the stress and angst he had been dealing with lately.

Adrianna was Derron's social media coordinator. She'd recently graduated from DePaul University with her master's in digital marketing. Although she was only twenty-six, she already knew she always wanted to land a job working as marketing director one day for a fitness-based business. She started working for Derron a few months ago after completing an internship at one of Derron's friend's marketing firms. It was a match made in heaven. She always coveted a position working for a boutique gym in the heart of the city.

"Yeah, I like that shit," Derron purred, guiding Adrianna's head up and down with his right hand.

The CEO went off into a daze and closed his eyes. Adrianna's head game had his ass sent straight to the seventh level of heaven. Erotic blessedness from another dimension.

Seconds morphed into minutes, but then the realization of time suddenly hit Derron like a bullet from a gloc. His eyes burst open and his attention latched to his iPhone sitting off on the side on his desk. "6:51" beamed on the screen. "FUCK!" Derron blurted aloud, interrupting Adrianna from extracting the biggest, creamiest nut from her secret lover's pulsing meat. Derron would've easily sent a sub instructor downstairs to teach the class, but he actually wanted to teach the class tonight in order to get a calorie-burning workout in for himself.

Adrianna looked up at Derron with slight confusion. "What's wrong?"

"I gotta get downstairs for my seven o'clock! You almost made me late!"

"No, you made yourself late," Adrianna quickly retorted, rolling her eyes to an aluminum ceiling fan slowly spinning in the center room. A look of extreme disappointment distorted her usually sexy face. "You know what...I'm done. I'm not doing this stupid shit no more. Ughhh, you always do this, I swear! So yeah, I'm done. Fucking done." She wiped her mouth, stood up and rushed over to a mirror to fix herself. They were supposed to be meeting about how to increase engagement on his Facebook business page...as it was marked in his Outlook calendar. But the 1:1 private sessions were just a ruse for sex and snorting lines of pure coke.

Derron's face turned into a scrunch as he quickly pulled up his gym shorts and boxers. He stood up and tightened the rope in his gray Nike gym shorts. His dick, although softening, was still visibly hard. "What the fuck you mean by that?" he asked, groping himself, hoping the erection would die down by the time he got to his class.

"Are you fucking kidding me right now? You're really gonna ask that question?"

"Yeah...'Cuz I am thoroughly confused. Did you forget that I also teach classes? The fuck?!?"

Adrianna said, "Umm, no. I didn't forget, asshole. I said what I said because we've been at this now for nearly two months and I'm starting to get the feeling this isn't going anywhere." She paused, looked up to the ceiling once more and then shook her head. "Look, I'm tired of being your sex slave at your beck and call."

Derron smacked his teeth and waved her away. "You trippin' for real. I didn't realize it was nearly seven already. Those women downstairs would eat me the fuck alive if I don't go. I got money to make," Derron tried to quickly explain. However, his condescension murdered any sympathy Adrianna may have had for his busy schedule.

Of course, Adrianna was very much aware of the fact that her boss was always on his feet, working hard to expand his bourgeoning fitness empire. Mr. Harrington was obsessed with his business, working damn near thirteen to fifteen hours daily. Sometimes, he slept at the gym. Derron's zealous work ethic wasn't her gripe though. She was just simply fed the fuck up with feeling like she was just a convenient and seemingly naive sex doll he could fuck anytime his dick had a tingle for some pussy.

"I'm not dumb, Derron. I know you have classes to teach," she responded. "My issue is I just don't feel comfortable with this situation

at all. I feel exploited," she ranted. She babbled complaint after complaint, mouthing off to the man who was many years her senior. To her, it seemed like he always had an excuse for why their sexual rendezvous always ended up either short or expedited to the point where she barely got any real sexual satisfaction herself. And this was the very reason why she felt like she was his sex slave. "But, yeah, whatever. Like I said, I'm not gonna be your sex slave anymore. Let's just go back to being professional, ok?" she fake smiled and then rolled her eyes again.

Derron didn't like the snarky, defiant attitude coming from his employee-lover. He paused for a moment and threw Adrianna a curious look. "I'm sorry you feel that way but I thought you were enjoying our sessions as well," Derron said. "But if that's how you feel and you want to go back to being 'professional' then, by all means, let's do that."

"Okay. good then," Adrianna said. She turned around and began to walk off, mumbling under her breathing, "Fucking Asshole..." But just as she was about to exit the office, Derron blurted out, "But, ughhh, if we are gonna be professional, that means you're fired...You can leave now. Get your shit and get the fuck out. Now..."

Adrianna's eyes suddenly grew wide and filled with surprise. *Fired?* Is he fucking kidding me? she thought. She was ready to fire off like a nuke from North Korea.

"Ummm...Excuse me?" Adrianna's defiant tone shifted into a high, inquisitive pitch. She threw her hands in the air out of confusion. "You can't just fire me! WAIT! WAIT! WAIT! Are you fucking serious right now? You're gonna fire me 'cause I don't fuck you or suck your dick anymore?"

"Yes...I *am*. Serious like a fucking heart attack. I mean, technically, you were the one who came onto me. Also, according to the employee handbook, employees can't engage in fraternization. You violated the rules, so you gotta go...," Derron responded nonchalantly as he splashed a few sprays of Versace cologne on his neck.

He didn't even bother to give his now-former employee any eye contact when he uttered his decision to terminate her ass on the spot. In fact, he somewhat got off on it because he actually had been meaning to let her go anyways. He just decided to use the current opportunity to give her the pink slip. He thought she didn't know jackshit about social media. He just kept her around for the convenient head and pussy. And now he was starting to get tired of that because he had other sources...Sources in his own gym.

"Derron..." Adrianna said as an obese smile grew on her face. She coolly strolled over to him and looked him dead in his eyes. "Seems like you didn't take a business law class when you were getting your

MBA. You fire me, you do realize I can sue you for sexual harassment. I'll take every damn penny you have in your pocket and turn this gym into a homeless shelter. And because you'll be so broke after I get done with you, I might just offer you a bed."

Derron lifted an eye brow and said, "Really?"

"Yeah...Really..." Adrianna cocked her head to the side and produced a devious smile once more. She stood her ground. Me Too movement gave this confident black girl some guts to rage and protest oppressive corporate patriarchy. Even if it came from another person of color. A black man at that.

Oh, this bitch is bold as fuck, Derron thought as he returned an eerie grin.

"Besides, I was going to quit anyway. You're a fucking low life piece of shit. I should've known from the day I landed my eyes on you. A straight-up piece of shit. And your dick isn't even all of that. I've had bigger and better. Actually, I've even had smaller, and your dick is still trash. You're a joke. This place is a joke. I should also report you to the IRS because I know you're doing shady shit around here...Thank God I got evi—"

But just like that, Adrianna's defiance was interrupted by a tight, unbreakable grip around her slender neck.

Derron slammed her into an adjacent wall. Arianna's eyes shot open in fear; but Derron's were squeezed into an intense, unblinking gape. A gaze that instantly let the now terrified woman know Derron was about to fuck her again. But this time he wasn't going to fuck her with his dick, but with his seemingly homicidal intention.

"AHHH!" Adrianna gasped then attempted to scream. However, her cry couldn't overcome the overpowering Gucci Man track rumbling and throughout the entire building.

Adrianna attempted to punch Derron's arms, hoping her incessant pounding would loosen Derron's grip around her neck.

The nigga was immune to the punches though. He continued to squeeze her neck all while pressing his full body weight into her, quickly dampening her attempt to fight him off. He squeezed his grip harder around her neck and peered deeply into her eyes growling, "Don't you EVER in your fucking life ever threaten me again. You understand me, bitch?!?"

Adrianna couldn't say a word. Tears plummeted from her reddened, strained eyes. Adrianna was slender and resembled a younger, sexier Alicia Keys. Even without makeup. Her mulatto sexiness was the sole reason for why Derron wanted to dig into her juicy guts the moment he met her.

Sanity somewhat set into Derron. He quickly realized he was now seconds away from killing the girl, so he loosened his grip around

Adrianna's neck just enough for her to finally get some oxygen and acknowledge his last statement. But before she could let out a word, he squeezed once more and pinned her harder into the wall.

"You know...I was beginning to like your fake ass Alicia Keys lookin' ass. But I see the bullshit you're on. But guess what? I already decided to fire your stupid ass a while ago. You don't even know what the fuck you're doing with my social media, dumb ass hoe," Derron growled as he loosened his grip once more.

"YOU'RE FUCKING CRAZY! LET ME GO! I'M GONNA CALL THE—"

What?!? Derron shoved her back into the wall, his hard hands wrapped around her throat once more. "BITCH! Do you think I'm playing with you?!? You gon call who now?"

Adrianna was motionless and mortified as she peered into the crazy nigga's eyes. *Okay, bitch, do not play with this nigga. He looks like he will definitely kill you!* That alarming, dreadful thought swam through her fear-wracked mind.

"I CAN'T HEAR YOU?!? WHO THE FUCK ARE YOU GOING TO CALL AGAIN?!?"

Adrianna didn't say a word. Tears just continued to stream down her face. "Nn-no-nobody," she barely squeaked with a stutter. "I-I www-won't call nnn-noo-nobody!"

"That's what I thought..." Derron's scowl transformed into a joker-like smile. "I'll send your paycheck in the mail. Go pack your shit up and get the fuck out of my business, you young, dumb slut. Fuck you think you talkin' to?!? Yo pussy and head ain't even all that. And yo loose ass twat smells like the back of my earrings, you rank, stank mindless bitch. Now get the fuck out!"

The second Adrianna was able to get from around Derron's presence, she quickly grabbed her purse and cell phone off Derron's desk. Then she stormed out of the office. Derron laughed and shook his head. "Stupid ass. Fucking millennials..."

Derron strolled over to a hanging body mirror attached to his in-office bathroom door. He goggled himself for a second, so cocky and arrogant, assured he was the finest specimen to ever walk the earth. Derron wasn't a Gemini, but he definitely had two sides to him, and tonight he shone his darkness. "Showtime!" he beamed.

Derron checked himself one last time, admiring his modelesque physique. He stood at around 5'11 and weighed about a good two hundred pounds of pure shredded military muscle. He had a shiny bald head, a well-trimmed beard and a set of piercing hazel brown eyes that seduced women by the dozens.

The gym boss and CEO adjusted his workout uniform and then walked back over to his desk. He sat down and picked up his office phone and immediately dialed Erica, his receptionist.

"Hey, Derron!" she answered.

"Hey, Erica," Derron smiled. "I'm gonna have Jake cover my seven-pm. Can you run up to my office right quick?

"Sure thing, Derron! I'm coming up right now as we speak!"

"Cool..." Derron hung up and then picked the phone back up. He dialed Jake's extension which went straight to his right hand trainer's cell phone. Derron knew his most senior personal trainer on staff had an empty schedule so he was able to run the seven-pm boot camp with no issues. After he told Jake to get his ass downstairs and start class, within seconds Erica came knocking on his door.

"Come in, it's open," Derron chimed sitting behind his desk. His eyes were set on his laptop monitor.

"Sup, D," Erica smiled, revealing a small gap between her teeth.

Derron stood up and closed his laptop. He ambled over to Erica and, without hesitation, grabbed her waist and pulled her into his presence. "Don't act like you don't know what time it is," Derron said licking his partly chapped lips. He was fasting today and had nothing to drink, not even a sip of tap water, for the last five or so hours. "I love it when you put on that fake ass front. You're so cute when you do that shit."

Erica laughed. "Well, I don't want us to get in trouble. After all, you said the first rule to the gym is coworkers can't fuck each other..."

"You're right...You follow all the rules, too."

Derron leaned in and began to sow succulent kisses all over Erica's neck. She, too, planted kisses on his. The two then ferociously made out in the office. Within minutes, both of them had their clothes off and Derron didn't hesitate in putting a much-needed brutal dick down on Erica.

Chapter Three

The nonstop sound of pulsing electronic music replaced the war-like Hip Hop bass playing earlier throughout the boot camp classroom. Class was almost done. Sessions at BeastCORE only lasted for an hour. However, by the pained looks on everyone's face, you could've sworn the boot camp lasted for two. Maybe even three if you asked the older black woman with the gold buzz cut in one of the corners of the classroom.

Every single woman inside the classroom regardless of age, size and physical conditioning had reached a level of angry exhaustion. But hey, it was worth it. The fatigue was an agonizing byproduct of melting those hard-to-lose pounds away.

"ALRIGHT, LADIES! We got one more round to complete! We want that lactic acid to build up in your muscles! Remember, lactic acid means more HGH. More HGH means more fat loss! Don't stop! You got it! And remember, bend those hips! We want hip flexion for a full squat!" Jake screamed amid the din of nonstop womanly grunts and groans.

The thumping club music muzzled some of the grumbles, making Jake a tad more inclined to increase the intensity of the air squats he had the women doing. "FEEL THE BURN, LADIES! DEEPER AND HIGHER! LET'S GOOOO!"

Aside from Derron, Jake was a popular instructor in the gym. And like Derron, he was very much passionate about helping his clients reach their fitness goals. With his muscular bronze arms folded to his chest, he sauntered the room and observed all forty women doing their best to complete the last round.

At first, Lacey didn't think a basic body exercise would be this brutal, but she was trying her hardest to complete the back-to-back repetitions of air squats. Every square inch of her frame was drenched in sweat. Her thigh muscles were on fire. *When is this shit going to end?!? I am going to fuck Lexy up! I can't believe she got me doing this bullshit*, Lacey kept thinking, her knees were ready to explode. She took a quick glare over at her friend-now-turned-enemy. Alexandria seemed unfazed by the exercise. She was jumping up and down in the

air with no issues. She was in perfect form, bending her hips and exploding back up into the air. Her arms flexed straight out. Her breathing not wasn't even rapid or labored.

Alexandria looked over at Lacey, her sister in the struggle, noticing she was about ready to collapse. "Come on, you got it!" she laughed as she wiped her brow clear of salty sweat.

Although Lexy could feel makeup ruined, she didn't give a damn. It'd be better to have a messed up face than to look all out of shape. That's embarrassing. That was her thought earlier since she now had an agenda to show off to Mr. Derron himself. But he never showed up, so Jake now had her full attention. Yup, she was just that desperate for male attention and she didn't care. No lie, but she really did spend most of the class attempting her best to be student number one.

Bitch, shut up! was what Lacey wanted to say back to Alexandria but she responded with a nervy "I'm trying!"

Those last hellish minutes almost had Lacey ready to climb into an early grave, but then she suddenly heard Jake scream, "ALRIGHT! TIME'S UP! AWESOME WORKOUT, LADIES!"

"Finally! OH MY GOD!" Lacey cried. Taking deep breaths, she leaned over, grabbed her knees, and attempted her hardest to collect her rapid breaths.

"Recovery time, ladies! Make sure you stay hydrated!" Jake yelled with a big ass grin stretched across his broad, chiseled face.

"Wheewww, girl! Shit!" Alexandria laughed. She rested her hands on her waist and playfully shook her head.

"Girl...I'm....I'm gonna pass out, I swear to...to...God," Lacey squealed, swearing to herself she felt like she was on a cruise ship in the middle of a hurricane.

Lacey could've and would've slapped the shit out of bestie for subjecting her to the brutal workout. But queasiness put a stop to that. The pits of her stomach thundered. She was seconds away from throwing up chunks of Trader Joe's chicken salad, cantaloupe and saltine crackers she had for lunch right into the middle of her own big ass sweat puddle on the rubber workout floor.

Alexandria was a social butterfly and had a habit of frequenting gyms and yoga studios to meet new friends (mainly men). However, Lacey was the complete opposite. Though she wasn't a quiet, introverted person; she was pretty much a homebody, spending most of her after-work hours at home reading and listening to random podcasts.

Lacey went to the gym maybe all of two to three times a week. Usually in the mornings before work. And even when she went to the gym, she never ever had the desire, not even an inkling, to subject herself to high intensity workouts. If anything, she was more inclined

to take a yoga class here and there. From time to time, if she was looking for a challenge, she'd take a spinning class. However, for the most part, she just stuck with her favorite treadmill. She'd also hit the resistance training machines here and there to keep her body toned.

Although it took her a minute, Lacey finally came back to her senses. The nausea seemed to go away. Some moments later, the pair found a corner in the room to relax and stretch. Alexandria noticed Jake was making his way over to them. "Oh shit, oh shit," Alexandria muttered in a low, anticipatory voice as she tried to quickly get herself together. Last thing she wanted was to look sweaty and delirious. *Time to secure bae.*

Jake smiled and said, "Hey, wassup! I've never seen you all here before I think. How ya'll like the class?" Jake asked and smiled, revealing perfect white teeth.

Anyone laying their inquisitive eyes on the trainer could tell he had to have been some sort of ex-professional athlete. His tall, muscular frame paired excellently with striations and veins running down his exposed tatted arms. His hard, warrior-like physique alone was all the evidence anyone needed to know the man had to have been a runningback or a wide receiver.

Alexandria took a quick scan of him up and down and immediately noticed his bulge. *Eight inches? Nine? Nah, ten inches. At least! Fuck! This nigga is FOINE and he's packin'?!?* she thought as she gulped and said, "It was great actually! It was our first time!"

"I'm glad to hear that! So, I assume you all will be signing up for our membership then?"

"Yeah! Why not?!?" Alexandria said with pronounced excitement.

"Umm," Lacey interjected. "How much is it?" she asked raising her eyebrow. *Girl, I'm 'bout to get laid off. Ain't nobody tryin' to spend extra money they don't have!* she thought.

Alexandria looked over at Lacey and tightened her lips, letting her know through her facial expression not to come off as a Debbie Downer.

Jake pulled his right hand up to his chin and tapped it with his index as he said, "Well, it depends on how many classes you wanna take, to be honest with you. Our most popular package for the ladies, the GoddessBody package is about three-hundred a month. But—"

“Three hundred dollars?!?!?” Lacey interrupted. “You don't think that’s a lot of money for a gym membership?!?”

“Is it expensive though? I see it as an investment…Health is wealth.”

Both Lacey and Alexandria turned around to see who made that last comment.

It was Derron...

He was standing there, arms folded and tucked in his sides. His overtly over-confident asshole persona fully projected throughout the room. As usual...

Lacey's mouth dropped a half-inch in surprise but she shut it once she realized she was staring a bit too hard. Yup, Alexandria wasn't lying. AT ALL! This nigga was sexy as fuck! His aura. OH MY GOD, BITCH! Lacey was getting turned on just by taking in Derron's presence. This was the first time in a LONG time Lacey suddenly found herself instantly attracted to a man just by giving him a gaze.

Jake looked over at Derron and said, "Oh, hey, sup, boss!"

Derron stood next to Jake, reached his hand out and the two dapped up. Derron didn't give Jake eye contact because he had his seductive eyes focused on Lacey and Alexandria. Mainly Lacey, though. He asked, "So, tell the truth...Did Mr. Jake here do a good job teaching the class, ladies?"

"Of course! He's the best! Do you all offer one-to-one training sessions?" Alexandria didn't hesitate to ask.

Damn, this bitch was being a bit extra now! Lacey thought, but now she couldn't honestly blame her for being so obvious with her flirtation. Both of these dudes were gorgeous as fuck.

Lacey and Alexandria came across fine ass niggas all the time, but most of those fine ass dudes were young, broke and probably crazy. Yeah, the dick may have been good. Broke, lunatic niggas always had bomb dick. But both Lacey and Alexandria wanted stable, financially secure bomb dick. And just from first impressions, Lacey presumed these two fine ass niggas were different compared to the norm.

Jake – he didn't have that stereotypical light-skinned fuckboy with felonies look. He kind of reminded her of a more tanned version of Drake. He even had the same type of well-trimmed beard. Derron seemed composed, polished and professional. He gave her Blair Underwood vibes. Similar face build. He also seemed very military-like. No tattoos. His ears were pierced, but they didn't make him look hood. The small diamond studs gave him slight edge, but he still seemed very straight and narrow. Lacey picked up on some slight smug in his attitude. But that was an alpha male for you. They could afford to be cocky because they were in the minority - a minority that was in high demand among black women seeking stable, long-term partners. A rare commodity nowadays apparently. Both men were the embodied antithesis of street nigga vibe - something not common in major hood ass city like Chicago. Both of these presentable black men looked paid and probably had AMEX black cards. They probably never sat in a jail cell. Oh, and most definitely didn't have kids either. All types of assumptions ran through Lacey's head as she stood back and watched Alexandria continue to run her mouth.

Okay, wait, wait, wait, girl. WAIT A MINUTE! Lacey's thoughts came to an abrupt halt. *You makin' a lot of assumptions here...Think for a second. Hrrrm. Ask yourself this: are these niggas...gay? Never know nowadays. See, something was always wrong with black men who looked like they had their shit together. It always something, right? Something....Something*...Lacey couldn't quite put her finger on *it*.

Lacey's attraction to Derron seemed to diminish as she now shifted into thinking these guys were probably either gay or were into slim white bitches who drank spirulina and wheatgrass shots every day.

"Lacey! Lacey!" Alexandria shouted, snapping bestie out of a daze. "You heard that?"

Lacey was silent. Then she uttered, "Nah." Lacey didn't realize she drifted off into Lalaland and a whole ass conversation about nutrition and workouts seemed to have taken place.

"Sorry, I was just thinking about work...," she obviously lied.

Derron chuckled. "*Work*?"

"Yeah...work...," Lacey responded with slight nervousness. The way Derron responded and said the word work instantly killed off any odd suspicions of his sexuality. Wow, this guy is so beautiful. She got it now. Alexandria definitely did her homework on this place, so now she wasn't regretting the nausea-inducing workout at all.

Derron turned and looked at Jake. “Anyways, we can definitely work with you. We have a guaranteed results policy. Hundred-percent refund if we don't deliver. With that being said, I do believe Jake does have space on his schedule to take on new clients…”

“I sure do!” Jake replied. “I can go over some packages with you upstairs…that’s if you like. No pressure.”

“Sure! I’m definitely interested!” Alexandria glanced at Lacey and said, “Girl, I’ll be right back!

Lacey didn’t respond. Bestie was being thirsty as fuck, but she had every excuse to be. Derron’s presence was still doing a number on her.

“Okay,” she said to Alexandria with a somewhat flat and nervous smile.

Alexandria and Jake walked off. Other women in the class mingled with one another and some slowly made their way out of the classroom to go shower and depart from the gym.

Derron turned his attention to Lacey. “So, you really think three-hundred dollars is a lot of money on a gym membership?” He was polite with his question.

“I mean…I think it is…Others may not think that. I liked the class though. I can see myself coming back...That's if ya'll have a Groupon or a LivingSocial I can use,” Lacey said. “I’m currently on a tight budget.”

“Which gym do you currently go to?”

“Well…I have a membership at LA Fitness.”

“Hrrrm, interesting…” Derron replied. Then he asked, “Where do you live?”

“South side. In Hyde Park.”

“Oh, cool, cool. I actually used to live there years ago." Derron reached his hand out and said, "I’m Derron Harrington by the way. I’m the founder and CEO. Nice to meet you."

Lacey grinned. “I’m Lacey. Nice to meet you as well,” she said and shook his hand.

A smile came across her face as she took in the man's overwhelming attractiveness. Just shaking his hand alone sent Lacey into a frenzy. Although they were rough and meaty, she could only imagine what those hands could do in bed. She quickly stopped her mind from going there.

A blip of some awkward silence came between the two for a moment before Lacey threw Derron another blushing smile and said, “I enjoy my gym though.”

“Haha, yeah, I bet. But I bet you won’t get the same type of results you’d get here. Like I said, three-hundred a month is an investment in YOU. Not some money-hungry corporation based out of dirty ass Los Angeles.”

“Hahah, what do you have against LA? I love it there! I wanna move there one day!”

“You do? I spent a decade there. It has some cool parts. Most of it is shit though. I prefer Miami.”

“Oh yeah, I love Miami, too! I just came back not too long ago!” Derron paused for a moment, and his eyes turned to seductive slips. He bit his bottom lip and then asked, “If you don’t mind me asking, but what are your goals?”

“What do you mean?”

“Well, are you trying to sculpt? Get in shape for a marathon or a 5k? Bodybuilding competition?”

“Well, right now, I’m just trying to tone up and just maintain, you know? Sculpt up a little bit…”

“I see…” Derron pulled out his cell phone and scanned his Google calendar. He continued, “Listen, I usually don’t do this but from time to time I spot certain people in my classes who I want to personally train to add to my portfolio. I mean, I’m not trying to suggest anything but I would definitely want to continue to work with you…Eventually, you’ll see the value in BeastCORE and the other classes I offer here.”

Lacey stood there silent for a second to process what Derron was saying. She didn’t know whether or not to take his suggestion as a sign of flirtation or if he was just simply being a gentleman and offering her free personal training.

“Wow, for real?”

“Yeah…For real.”

“And I wouldn’t have to pay for anything?”

“No. Not a dime. Well, I’d like to use your before-and-after pictures. I'll just need you to sign a consent agreement form just to have your permission to use those photos on my social media pages and stuff…”

“Why not video?” Lacey asked. “Video seems to resonate more on those platforms…” Her marketing background was kicking in, trying to give the man some advice.

“Yeah, I thought about that, too. My social media coordinator, well, actually my FORMER social media coordinator, made those suggestions to me a while ago but I didn’t take her advice seriously.”

“Maybe you should’ve…I actually work in marketing myself. Well, I’m a copywriter.”

“Really? What firm?”

“Latham Associates. Have you heard of them?”

Derron chuckled and lightly lowered his head a bit. “Yeah, I know them. They're one of my guys' biggest competition. I'm sure you've heard of Markham Digital?”

Lacey’s mouth flung wide open. “Of course! We just lost a client to them. Which is why I think I may be out of a job come next week.”

Derron paused for a moment. “Damn, my bad…I didn’t mean to __”

“No, I’m sorry. I should’ve never said that,” Lacey interjected. “Anyways, enough about that. I’m interested in learning more about your offer though.”

“Cool,” Derron smiled. “Here’s my card with all of my information. Send me an e-mail or give me a buzz tomorrow.” Derron pulled out his business card and handed it to Lacey. She took it and glanced at it.

“I appreciate it, Mr. Harrington…I’ll give you a buzz tomorrow." Lacey grinned and walked off to the locker room. Derron stood there and watched her walk off.

Truth be told, Derron already had his eyes laid on Lacey. No one noticed, but after dicking down Erica in his office, he crept his way to the classroom and observed the boot camp session to see if Jake was doing a good job. That was when Derron immediately took notice of Lacey. His jaw had dropped when he laid his eyes on her; he swore in his mind she had a heavenly beauty he hadn’t seen on any other woman he’d encountered in his life.

Despite being sweaty, Lacey's flawless mahogany skin glistened to him. She had long, straight black hair running down her back, touching the top of her already perfectly sculpted round ass popping

through her tight pants. Her waist slim like a Florida palm tree. Her titties sat up – perky and perfect like two round brown coconuts. Derron just knew they were the right size to suck on. When Derron first noticed Lacey, he swore he could already taste her hard nipples on the tip of his tongue. He envisioned her riding him as he plowed his nine-inch hardened dick in and out of her small juicy camel toe he zeroed in on from afar.

~

Lacey made her way back into the locker room. Alexandria meandered in moments later with a big grin on her face. By now the locker room was somewhat empty; only a shower could be heard running in the far off background.

“BISSHHHHH, I GOT THEM DIG-ITS!” Alexandria laughingly yelled and then immediately clasped her mouth when she realized there was a lone older white woman off in the corner changing out of her workout clothes. Alexandria looked at the woman, “I’m sorry, ma’am…” Alexandria and Lacey looked at each other, both slightly embarrassed. Once Alexandria made her way over to the locker adjacent to Lacey, she leaned in and said, “Girl, he is soooooooo FOINE!!!!” She was referring to Jake.

“Mr. Derron is fine, too!” Lacey said. “Girl, he wants to work me out…for free!”

“WHAT!?!? STAHHHP IT!!!!"

"No! He wants me to come in and train me!"

"Well, there you go, girl! We both securing some sexy ass niggas!”

Lacey shook her head. “Girl, I don’t know though…It’s just… something about him. Like he look kind of crazy or something.”

Alexandria smacked her teeth and laughed, “Girl, that’s probably because he got that good d! Shit, your lame ass needs a slightly crazy nigga to add some spice in your life. He looks like he’s all action, too!”

“Girl, whatever. You can have that crazy nigga. Not I. He’s just soo… I don’t know. I can’t put my finger on it.”

“He’s just so what? Girl, you better stop trippin’ and get them free workouts!”

“Yeah, I know…But still, he’s just so sexy though. He just has these eyes. Like, he could see right through my soul.”

Alexandria took her clothes off and now was standing there, her breasts fully exposed. She had on nothing but a pair of panties now. Lacey followed suit. The two were friends for so long they were used to occasionally seeing each other naked from time to time.

The pair continued to talk for a few moments before they made

their way to the showers. Afterward, they both headed back home. All Lacey could do for the rest of the night was sip red wine and think about sexy ass Derron. But there was just something to him and she couldn't quite put her finger on it still…

~

Ding-Dong. Ding-Dong.

Adrianna's eyes shot open at the sound of the apartment doorbell. "The fuck?" she moaned and wiped her hazy eyes and hopped off the couch, making her way to her front door, wondering who it was.

She didn't know what time it was. Probably a little past twelve, she presumed. She glanced down at her living room coffee table and grabbed her phone. She was right. 12:29 AM flashed in scribbly green neon on her android.

Dedra, her roommate, was still at work. She usually didn't get off until two am. *Maybe she forgot her key?* Adrianna thought as she cautiously made her way to the front door. She gazed out of the peephole and gasped.

Derron…

He was standing in front of the door. Quiet. His eyes seemed ready to dole out a much-deserved apology. He was holding a bouquet of fresh sunflowers.

"DERRON! GO AWAY! I'M GONNA CALL THE POLICE!"

"Adrianna, I'm sorry. Look, I overreacted. I thought about it. Listen, you're right."

Her quivering hands tightened around her cell phone. Ready to call the cops, she looked down, unlocked the phone and proceeded to dial 9-1-1. "JUST GO AWAY!" she shrieked. Hands quivering, she was ready to hit the call button.

Derron had been over to her place plenty of times despite the fact that they weren't an official couple or anything close to it. They just fucked when it was convenient but now Derron was acting as if he actually had more stake in their strange 'situationship'.

"DERRON! Please! I'm warning you. GO AWAY!" Adrianna screamed.

"I'm going through some things, Adrianna. But you know what...I'll just leave. Have a nice night. I went ahead and printed out your last paycheck and I also gave you something extra on the top to cover your expenses for the next few months," Derron mumbled behind the door. He leaned down and slid her paycheck under the door.

Adrianna glanced down and grabbed the paycheck. It wasn't in an envelope. She looked at the numbers and saw Derron had overpaid her…by nearly $15,000. She gasped not expecting to see the large

amount of money.

Ever since getting fired hours earlier, Adrianna fled straight home and cried herself to sleep on her couch. She didn't know honestly what she was going to do for work and she contemplated just abandoning the apartment and her roommate and moving back in with her family. But now, looking at the big check written out to her, Adrianna had more than enough money to not worry about her expenses for at least half a year.

"Oh my God!" She quickly unlocked the door and opened it. Derron wasn't standing there. She looked down the hallway and saw him making his way toward the staircase. "Wait, Derron, wait!" she called out to grab his attention before he left. "Come back!"

Derron turned around and projected this look of puppy dog sadness on his face. He slowly trekked back down the hall and once he got in Adrianna's presence, he looked down and away from her. "Look, like I said, I'm sorry about earlier. I didn't mean to put my hands on you. I've just been going through a lot lately. Sales ain't what I want them to be, you know?"

Adrianna lowered her head and shook it. She glanced back up at Derron. "I'm sorry for saying what I said earlier. Sometimes, I just get so emotional…"

"Look. I get it...It's cool though. It was truly all my fault. I apologize once again," Derron said. He flashed a grin and handed Adrianna the bouquet of fresh flowers.

Adrianna gently took them out of his hands and then took a deep whiff. "How'd you know these were my favorite?" she smilingly asked.

Derron shrugged his shoulders and smiled. "Your personality screams sunflowers."

Adrianna, quiet, peered deep into the man's eyes. "Wow, you… You're really something else, Derron."

"I know. I can't help it…"

Silence engulfed the two of them.

"So…" Derron licked his lips and gazed Adrianna up and down. "Can we finish what we started earlier? I promise I won't have any interruptions this time."

"You promise?" Adrianna asked in an innocent, bashful tone.

"Promise…"

Adrianna leaned in and planted a kiss on Derron's lips. "Does this mean I can have my job back though?"

"Hrrm...We can work something out…"

"Okay…," Adrianna uttered and then grabbed Derron's hand and led him into the apartment.

Derron trailed her thinking Adrianna was such a young, gullible dumb bitch.

Chapter Four

Lacey sat at her desk inside of her office, staring hard at her Macbook. The anxious copywriter was twiddling her thumbs as she went over a creative brief for one of her clients. ASX Global was another huge client of the firm and she damn sure didn't want to do anything to lose them considering the news she received last week.

Ever since the big meeting last week, everyone around the office seemed to be on edge. Lacey was trying her best not to be fretful, but day in and day out, she found herself constantly worrying about her future.

She and Lexy talked about it a few more times, and luckily bestie bequeathed her some good advice. "Girl, if it's meant to happen, it'll happen. Stop worrying about the things you can't control. Do your best to control the things you can." So, taking the advice of Alexandria, Lacey was just going to take it one day at a time.

Now it was the start of a new week. Lacey decided she was going to change her outlook on everything, first starting with waking up exceptionally earlier this Monday. *Morning bird gets the worm*, her deceased father used to tell her all the time. And now the mantra was forcing her to put in that extra pep. She wanted to get in the office and do as much as she could to put forth a great impression. She wanted Doug to see that she was an indisposable asset to the firm.

Despite walking on eggshells all of last week, she hadn't heard a word about the possible layoffs. She was just going to play it by ear. Go with the flow. Shit, at this point that's all she could do. As far as meeting Derron, well, all of her gushy feelings seemed to go away once the reality of possibly losing her job came back to her. She quickly forgot about the man and just put all one-hundred percent of her concentration into work

Knock! Knock!

Lacey glanced up at her door and saw a young, tall white courier with a scruffy beard standing at her open door with a package in his hand. "Lacey?" he asked.

"Yes," Lacey responded, curious who the package was from as she wasn't expecting anything from anyone.

"I have a package for you, ma'am." The courier walked over with a big smile on his face. "I just need you sign here and initial here," he said and sat the brown small box on her table and handed her a tablet.

Lacey signed off she received the mysterious package. The courier printed her out a delivery receipt from a mobile printer dangling from his side. He handed the receipt to her and quickly exited her office. Lacey dashed to her door and closed it. Then she curiously meandered back over to her desk.

Eyes glued to the box, she got through all the wrapping and quickly opened the box. "What the hell?!?" she gasped. She pulled out a pair of exercise gloves along with a fresh pair of New Balance running shoes with neon orange and white trimming. The price tag was still attached and once she saw the bold '$359.99' on the tag she grew even more anxious. WHAT IN THE HELL?!? she thought as she also noticed a small note attached to the right shoe with by piece of clear tape. She ripped the note off and read it.

"Not to be a stalker, but you did promise to be my workout partner. Can you give me a call later this afternoon so we can still schedule our workouts? Best Regards – Derron Harrington."

Her blood pressure rose and her gut began overflowing with millions of butterflies. Lacey rushed over to her purse sitting on her desk and yanked her out her cell phone. She pulled up Lexy's number and dialed it. "Come on, girl, pick up, pick up!"

The phone rang a few times before bestie answered, "Hey, girl, wassup? Perfect timing! I was just about to call you!"

Lacey had Derron's note in her hand, still outraged at the price of the shoes. "OH! MY! GOD! Girl, you won't believe who sent me a package just now!"

"Who?"

"Derron!"

"Huh? Who is that?" Alexandria's confusion could be heard on the other end of the line. "Derron? Derron?"

"DERRON. The guy from the gym! The one you took me to! That DERRON."

"OHHH! Damn! What? What do you mean by he sent you a package? How in the hell does he even know where the fuck you work?"

"Shit, girl, I have no clue!"

Lacey thought about it for a quick moment. And she did indeed tell Derron about what she did for a living and where she worked. "Damn, I forgot just that quick I did tell him where I worked."

"BITCH! Girl, that nigga is already in love with you! You better go and get your man!" Alexandria chuckled.

“Ughhh, girl! He bought me a pair of these damn near $400 New Balances!”

“HOW YOU KNOW!?!”

“Because the fucking price tag is still on them! That’s how I know!”

“Girl! This nigga is GONNA MARRY YOU! HE KNOWS WHAT HE WANTS!” Alexandria screamed and burst into a ferocious laugh.

Lacey rolled her eyes. She didn’t quite find this situation funny or flattering. She just shook her head in confusion. Alexandria definitely was on something else, she thought.

“I don’t know. This… This is just a bit weird! You don’t think?”

Lacey just found it very strange Derron would go to such great lengths to try to remind her about their agreement. She hadn’t forgotten about his plan to work her out in exchange for some photos for his website and social media profiles though. She just was too stressed out from her current job situation to think about Derron, let alone go to the gym.

“No, it ain’t weird! That man is chasing you in the cutest way!”

“Yeah, I guess…,” Lacey responded. Anyone could hear the fretfulness in her tone.

“Look, girl, don’t worry about it! You overthinking it! What are you doing now? Let’s meet up for lunch!”

“Nothing. Well, I do have some work to do. I'm going over this creative brief before my four pm meeting.”

“Oh, hell, girl, you’ll have plenty of time! I’ll meet you there. Besides, like I said, I was gonna call you anyways. I’m in the area getting my nails done. I’ll pick you up.”

“You sure?”

“Yeah, I’m sure. Just meet me outside in ten minutes, okay?”

“Okay.” Lacey hung up the phone and then scrambled to gather her belongings. But before she could make it out of the door, Doug, her CEO, walked into her office unannounced.

“Hey, Lacey. We need to talk,” Doug said in a low tone.

“About?” Lace gulped.

“Well...I have some unfortunate news.”

Two building security guards along Rebecca, the VP of HR, suddenly showed up at the door standing next to Doug. Everyone had a low, solemn look on their faces.

~

“Look, girl, I know this may not be what you wanna hear but it's gonna be alright! Shit like this happens to everyone all the time, so don’t worry. Honestly, I don’t want you to take this the wrong way

but you're stressing way too hard over this. You just need to see it as a blessing in disguise," Alexandria said as she took a single tortilla chip out of a small mesh red basket sitting in front of her. She scooped the chip into a bowl of some mild reddish brown salsa and threw the salsa-covered greasy tortilla chip into her mouth. She took a sip from her margarita and looked around the semi-crowded Mexican restaurant. Lacey had an addiction to chips and salsa, but today that addiction had been forced into rehab. She was too stressed thinking about unemployment, so her appetite was shot to shit.

The two friends were dining for lunch at Uncle Julio's out in Lincoln Park. It was a typical Mexican chain restaurant known for its specialty guacamole and guava margaritas. Alexandria loved coming here though because there was a particular waiter she had a little, innocent crush on.

"Damn, I don't see guac bae today," Alexandria said as she finished smacking on the chip. She looked around the restaurant looking disappointed that her favorite waiter wasn't working the lunch shift. She also was infatuated with him, calling him 'guac boy', because he could make the shit out of some guacamole.

Since it was lunchtime though, a thick crowd of professionals congregated in the restaurant. Mainly young white blonde yuppies who worked and lived in the area.

"Girl...Really?"

"My bad...I am just trying to change the subject. Some good dick will make you realize you are overreacting. Think about it for a second...You over here 'bout ready to blow your brains out!" Alexandria continued, "I mean...Doug said he's going to give you six months' worth of severance pay. And you still can collect unemployment?!? Bitch, I wish I was in your shoes right about now!"

"UGHHHH! I guess that's easy for you to say…I mean, after all, you still have a job. I don't!"

"Ughhh, girl! People get let go every day! I mean, yeah, it's fucked up, but you can't sit there and gloat over it! What is that going to do for you? You're just gonna add more unnecessary stress in your life!"

Poor Lacey thought about it for a moment. "Yeah, I guess you're right," Lacey responded, lowering head. She took a sip from her strawberry margarita. No need for her to be careful about drinking while on the job given she didn't have one to go back to after lunch.

"I just never imagined I'd find myself in a situation like this…" Lacey paused for a moment and took another light sip. "Shit, I don't even know what I'm gonna tell my mom. She's gonna be so disappointed in me."

Alexandria smacked her teeth. "Lacey, girl, please stop it! Your mom would definitely understand. Girl, listen, it's gonna be cool!"

Alexandria burst into laughed and threw some more chips into her mouth.

"Stop what? I mean, I've never been through this before!"

"I mean, I know I'm sounding kind of callous, but remember, I've been in your shoes before. Things aren't always going to be easy. Sometimes you gotta take two steps back to move four steps forward. I'm telling you, when shit like this happens, for some odd reason or another, opportunities will start to sprout up."

"Yeah…" Lacey didn't sound too fully confident in what Alexandria was saying.

"But I need an opportunity like…now…"

"Be patient, Lacey! Girl, use this time to focus on YOU. I don't know if you realized this but lately, you've been lacking in the YOU department. In fact, you know what…" Alexandria pulled out her cell phone while she slapped another chip in her mouth. "I'm taking you down to get a mani, pedi and a massage. One of my girls in South Loop just hit me up today saying she cleared her schedule. I'll tell her I'm bringing someone with me. She'll kick me back some moolah for the referral, too."

"Lexy…Umm, what about your job though?"

Alexandria's face twisted. "Girl, FUCK them!!!" she laughed. "I'll just send an e-mail saying I'm out for the rest of the day due to a personal emergency."

"What emergency though?" Lacey slightly chuckled.

"YOU! My best friend is in dire straits! It's all about you now. You need to take care of YOU. That's the damn emergency! I can't let my bestie be out here wallowing in depression and anxiety over some bullshit!"

Lacey snickered. "Girl, I swear, anytime I'm feeling low, you bring me up. I need to get on your level."

Alexandria flashed a grin as she reached out and rested her hands over Lacey's. "Girl, no. You need to get on your own level. Create your own lane. Stop comparing yourself to others! We all have our own road to travel. Now, let's get out of here."

Alexandria yelled for the waiter to bring the check and, of course, knowing her bestie's current lack of employment, she went ahead and covered the full tab. The two women quickly finished their drinks and then made their way outside.

"I hope you also went ahead and hit up Mr. Derron by the way… I'm sure he'd want to hear from you soon," Alexandria joked.

"I will…Yeah, you're right. I think I'm just overthinking everything. I'm gonna send him a message right now…"

"You better!" Alexandria spat jokingly. The two besties walked up to a navy blue Corolla. Alexandria had ordered an Uber ride inside the

restaurant and now the two were headed south, back to the Loop for their last-minute mani-pedi appointment.

~

"HEY, HEY, HEY…Stop right here! Pull over right here! I just wanna cool out for a moment, okay?" Derron barked at his Lyft driver.

The older middle eastern Lyft driver pulled over on the side of Halsted street near a metered parking spot. "I can't park here, sir," the driver complained. "This is metered parking. I'm gonna get a ticket," the tan baldheaded driver said in his thick Arab-Egyptian accent. He looked back at Derron in his rearview mirror noticing his passenger seemed super-antsy. Last thing he wanted to do was piss the man off and end up with a one-star rating. But in Chicago, not paying parking meters were met with hefty fines. Don't pay the fine, your car would end up getting booted in a heartbeat. Shit, half the people living in the Chicago at one point had their car incarcerated until they coughed up hundreds, sometimes, thousands of dollars to pay off parking fines.

Derron's eyes had devolved into investigative slits as he peered out of the back passenger window, staring off at the front entrance of Uncle Julio's Mexican Restaurant. But when he heard his Lyft driver voice his concern, he scrunched his face and growled, "Ok, and?!? The fuck?!?!? Man, I paid for the damn ride! And I need you to cool out for a second while I wait for someone…Got it?"

The Lyft driver cleared his throat. "But sir…I can't just sit here in this spot. I'd have to go put money in the meter," he replied.

"I SAID COOL THE FUCK OUT, YOU AYRAB MUHFUCKA!"

The driver froze in place and pursed his lips. From the sound of Derron's voice and from the look he had on his face, the last thing he wanted to do was continue to infuriate his passenger.

Derron saw Lacey and Alexandria coming out of the restaurant. He could see from afar that the two women were laughing and giggling. "Damn, she is so fine…I gotta have her," he mumbled as he began to massage his throbbing bulge. "Oh yeah, she's mine. I'm gonna have her…"

The Uber driver, slightly scared and annoyed, looked back and said, "Excuse me, sir?"

"Man, just mind yo own muhfuckin' business and run me up the block."

The driver didn't hesitate. He pulled out of the metered parking spot and up the street. Once the driver got to Derron's original destination, Derron threw the driver a hundred-dollar bill and said, "Don't give me a one-star rating either or I'll find your ass and fuck yo shit up. Sorry for the troubles." He hopped out and made his way

inside of a martial arts studio.

Chapter Five

Arrogant more than ever, Derron coolly strolled into the Northside Karate Center studio. It was a small but growing child and adult martial arts business he opened up a few years ago with along with a buddy of his from the military.

It was almost one pm. Classes weren't going on. Other than a small portable fan blowing near the receptionist's desk, not a single sound could be heard throughout the studio. It wasn't that big of a studio. There were only two classrooms in it along with an office in the back.

Derron made his way past the two classrooms and trudged down a dark hallway and toward the small administrative office. The office had a massive window overlooking the street. Since it was a sunny day, light beamed out of the office's door and into the hallway. That was how Derron knew the office's door was already wide open.

Derron walked up to the door and stood there for a few seconds in silence, gazing intently at a petite young blonde white woman sitting behind her iMac computer screen. Finally Derron decided to announce his presence

Knock! Knock! Derron cleared his throat and lifted a haughty brow.

Jennifer looked up and then grinned. Her piercing ocean blue eyes attached to Derron as she bit her lip. "Finally…I didn't think you were going to show up," she uttered. She got up from her seat and made her way to Derron. He was still standing outside of the door with his arms folded as he leaned against the door's frame.

Derron said, "I had to make some last minute stops. What's up? What's the emergency?"

Jennifer let out a small chuckle. "Damn! You don't miss me or anything? We haven't seen each other in over a week," she replied with seduction running in her voice.

Derron's eyes turned to curious nicks. He laughed. "You know I've been swamped lately. What's going on though? Everything alright?"

Jennifer planted a kiss on Derron's cheek and then pulled him into the office. She slammed the door shut and, without hesitation, began kissing him all over his neck and face.

"Damn, slow down," Derron mumbled but he wasn't resisting the

succulent, wet kisses being planted all over him.

“Sorry," she said smiling. But she didn’t slow down.

Derron grabbed her and pulled her closer into his presence. He, too, began to kiss all over her face and neck. The two then stood there in the middle of the quiet martial arts studio’s admin office, making out like two seventeen-year-olds about to fuck for the first time after a long night at prom.

Mr. Derron pushed the sexy white woman against the desk and then sat her on top of it. Jenn rushed in getting her t-shirt and bra off. Derron followed suit by quickly taking off his jacket, shirt and pulled down his pants along with his boxers.

Derron was already erect, ready to plumage his secret white bae’s pussy walls down.

“Fuck, I’ve been waiting for this for so many days now, please just fuck the shit out of me!” Jennifer growled in a seductive tone as she spread her legs and twiddled with her already soppy pussy lips.

“Really?” Derron laughed while mounting himself in between Jennifer and slid right inside of her. "Ahhh, fuck," he moaned, finding that familiar groove deep inside her vaj. Gliding in and out of her, he wrapped his hands around her thin neck and began to fuck her faster and faster.

“FUCK ME! FUCK ME! OH MY GOD!” the white girl yelled, her eyes rolled in the back of her head. With her mouth hung wide open, she was enjoying every inch of the dick. Derron, truth be told, was the first black guy Jennifer had ever been with.

Jen was a thirty-year-old Chicago transplant hailing all the way from white ass North Dakota. Growing up, it had always been a fetish for her and other blonde white girls like her to want to experience black dick. She almost came close while she was in high school. The guy, Torrance, a popular basketball player was the only “black” guy in her school. In actuality, he was biracial. And his biracial heritage was further confirmed on a date one night in her senior year...After a movie, ice cream and an intense make-out session in the parking lot of a Burger King, the popular varsity bball athlete pulled down his pants and revealed he was only working with a mere five inches. In her mind, she didn’t consider that true, quintessential “black dick”. She still fucked him though.

After graduating from high school, Jenn went off to a private Christian college in Iowa and never had any interactions with black people. Gaelin College actually had a zero population of black students. It wasn’t until she moved to Chicago two years ago (to work for Derron’s martial arts studio) that she finally had the opportunity to experience that infamous Mandingo meat…and now she was addicted.

As Derron continued to thrust in and out of Jenn, all she could do was think about marrying him and giving him five to six interracial children. Crazy thing was, these two weren't even an item. Weren't even anything close to having a "situationship". They just fucked. Nothing more, nothing less…

Derron simply came by the martial arts studio once in a blue moon to drop off some dick and paperwork. Then he'd head out. If he was generous enough, he'd eat her out and do a few lines of cocaine with her. But today, he had other shit to do. Only reason why he stopped by was that Jennifer had been blowing his phone up all morning long, telling him she had an emergency. She didn't quite disclosed what had been going on, but now he was here to figure out what exactly the issue was.

Once the two got done fucking, they quickly put their clothes back on.

"Ok, so what's the deal?" Derron asked as he zipped up his jacket and went over to a safe in the office closet.

"Well…I know we aren't an item or anything, but I just need to know what exactly are we doing?"

Derron scrunched his face up and glanced over at her. "What? What in the hell are you talking about, Jenn?"

"Derron…You do realize I love you, right?"

Derron grew silent; he raised a brow out of curiosity and concern. He turned his attentive gawk back to the medium-sized black safe. He found himself quickly annoyed at her statement that he wouldn't even give her eye contact out of basic respect. He lightly shook his head and proceeded to put in the combination to the safe. "No, I didn't realize you *loved* me," he mumbled. "Where are you going with all of this exactly?"

Jennifer exhaled as she strolled up on him. She tapped him on his right shoulder. He looked at her again, but this time, his eyes shot down to the long, plastic object in her hand.

"What's that?" Derron asked.

"It's a pregnancy test…Derron, I'm pregnant…"

Derron's face squeezed tight. "Stop lyin'…Please...I don't have time for the fuckin' games today, okay?"

Jenn scowled. "Derron…Why would I lie? You're the only person I've been having sex with consistently. WE haven't been using condoms."

"How in the fuck am I supposed to know that? You think I'm just gonna sit back and let you tell me you're pregnant without at least letting me do my due diligence?"

Jennifer paused for a moment. A look of confusing disgust came over her face. "What do you mean 'do your due diligence'? Are you

fucking kidding me right now?"

Derron opened the safe and pulled out wads of bundled, fresh green benjamins. He stuffed the banded bundles in a small black duffle bag sitting on the side of the safe. "No, I'm not fucking kidding."

"Derron! It's your child! Who else would it be?!?"

"Shit, I don't know. Some other fuckin' lame. Or probably some Chad. Shit, could've easily been some other random ass dude you're probably fucking off Tinder or some shit."

Jennifer tapped her foot against the cold office floor holding her arms by her bony elbows. Her slender white face all of sudden turned red. Her heart rate intensified. "Wooooooooow! Like....This is so fucked up. I can't believe what I'm hearing right now. But hey...You know what?!? Why am I even fuckin' surprised right now? Typical of you people…"

"Typical of you people?!? The fuck is that supposed to mean exactly?" Derron became even more agitated at Jenn's last comment. You people?

"I mean…Isn't this the thing you black guys do? Go around, fuck the shit out of women, give them babies and then not take care of them? So the stereotype is true it seems…"

Derron scanned Jennifer up and down. "You know what…You're making me fucking mad right now and I suggest you back the fuck away from me or you're going to regret it."

"Regret what?!? At the end of the day, I know what you did to me. You got me pregnant! I'm telling you what the situation is. And to be honest with you, Derron, if you want me to be COMPLETELY honest with you – I'm going to keep it! YUP! That's right! I'm going to have YOUR baby."

Derron smacked his teeth and rolled his eyes. "Yeah, yeah, yeah. What the fuck ever. Until you show me solid proof that the baby is mines, I'm not believing anything…Not a goddamn thing! Got me fucked up."

Jenn's frustration boiled over. "UGHH, FUCK YOU! JUST LEAVE! I'M DONE EVEN HAVING THIS CONVERSATION WITH YOUR TEMPERAMENTAL ASS. I SHOULD'VE KNOWN FROM DAY ONE YOU WERE TOO GOOD TO BE TRUE!" she screamed, throwing her hands everywhere.

Derron was unfazed by her meltdown. "Yeah, yeah, yeah. What the fuck ever," he replied as he threw the duffle bag over his shoulders and walked toward the door. Derron thought for a split second and then he said, "You know what…" He took the bag off his shoulders, quickly opened it up and counted out a thousand dollars in twenty-dollar bills. "Here's a stack. Be a fucking responsible adult and take

care of your situation. Remember - us black guys won't take care of our children." He continued, "And now that you're unemployed, you might wanna go handle that ASAP before those bills start to stack the fuck up."

"Unemployed?!?" Jenn's face looked like she saw the ghost of her dead grandmother.

"Yeah. Your ass is fired. Get the fuck out. NOW."

"WHAT THE FUCK?!?!? You can't fucking fire me! You're technically a silent investor. Kelsey has the final say. And if you fire me, I'll file a lawsuit against you and Kelsey for sexual harassment! You must've forgot my father's a lawyer and he'll sue you for everything you have!"

Derron smacked his teeth and uttered, "Bitch, whatever. Go get rid of that baby before I give you some real problems. Real nigga problems."

"Problems like what?!? More than the one I'm gonna give you if you don't respect me?!?" Jennifer replied with brazen confidence. She let out a snicker and a cloak of self-assuredness came over her.

"Look, bitch…Handle your shit. Besides, I'm sure your racist ass father wouldn't want a mixed baby anyways..."

"I'm keeping my child, you asshole!"

"Bitch, whatever…Holler at me when you get your fucking mind right, you simple ass hoe."

"White bitch?!?" Jennifer got close to Derron. She glanced him up and down. "FUCK YOU, YOU DIRTBAG!!!"

"Whatever, Jennifer. Get the fuck out of my way," Derron barked as he stormed past his livid, potential white baby mama.

Chapter Six

Some hours had passed, and now Lacey was sitting on her couch in her living room mindlessly watching a recap of the evening news. It was essentially the same shit she'd hear all the time. Typical Chicago news. Murders. Police brutality. Schizophrenic weather. Potholes getting repaired. Political corruption. Same shit, different day...

With a remote control in one hand and a burning joint in the other, Lacey had her eyes glued to her living room television. She wasn't paying attention though to the newscaster blabbering off the negative news. She had her own negative news to dwell on for the rest of the night going into the morning: unemployment. Joblessness created a fiery need in her to smoke a few joints of some heavy indica. Hopefully in a few minutes the THC would knock her out, making her forget all of what transpired earlier.

Earlier, she had a positive mood, thanks to Alexandria, but now she found herself wallowing back in her depression. Losing her job was still hitting her hard. She couldn't believe it. All of those years she worked hard. Put in a heavy grind day in and day out to make the company one of the top agencies in the city. She just assumed her seniority would somewhat shield her from the layoffs, but it turned out she was the first to get fired. Katie, one of her former co-workers, texted her earlier and told her she was at the top of the list for termination. And she would now because she worked in HR. A few others were let go; mainly interns and junior-level account executives. Lacey couldn't believe it. Why her? She was flabbergasted. Talk about loyalty. She thought her and Doug were tight enough he'd spare her job. Guess not.

The old white newscaster rambling on her TV was getting on her nerves, so she quickly changed the channel and ultimately ended up on an episode of All In The Family.

Buzz. Buzz. Buzz. Buzz.

Lacey heard her cell phone vibrating. It was resting on her coffee table. She quickly propped herself up, leaned forward and grabbed the still vibrating phone off the table. An unrecognizable phone number with a 312 area code flashed on the phone's screen. Her face twisted

into perplexity.

By now it was almost ten PM and Lacey pondered who in the hell would've been calling her this late.

"Hello?" she answered.

"Good evening…Is this Lacey?" the semi-familiar voice said over the phone.

"Umm, yes? Who is this?"

"This is Derron…From BeastCORE Studios."

Lacey's eyes grew big and wide like a chunky toddler landing her eyes on a piece of birthday cake. "Oh, hey, Derron! Wow….Umm, it's pretty late. How did you even get my phone number?"

Derron let out a light chuckle. "When you signed the liability waiver at the gym, you listed your cell phone number."

"Oh," Lacey said raising a brow.

"I'm sorry I'm not bothering you. Is this a good time to talk?" he asked.

Just hearing Derron's voice emanate through the phone made Lacey feel uneasy yet excited. "Ye-ye-yes," Lacey stammered. "I'm so sorry I didn't get a chance to text or call you. But I did get your package earlier. I don't even know what to say."

"Haha, well, you don't have to say anything," Derron responded and chuckled.

"Well, I do! Those shoes were expensive. I mean, I can't believe you even thought that much of me to track me down and send me a pair of shoes. You don't think that's doing too much?"

Derron paused for a moment and then said, "Lacey. It's not even what you think it is. New Balance is one of my gym's sponsors and we get free shit all the time. You really thought I would pay $400 for a pair of shoes for someone I barely know?"

And just like that Lacey felt instantaneous embarrassment. Couldn't even conjure a single word of reply. *Girl, duh!*

"Anyways, I was calling because I really really really think you should work out with me. I mean, I don't want to come off as a stalker or anything but I just think you'd make the perfect candidate for what I am trying to do."

"This sounds like an experiment or something."

"Well, honestly, it kind of is. I mean, not really. But you have…" He paused for a moment. "Well…"

"I have what?" Lacey retorted wondering what was Derron going to say next."Well...You have this natural sense of beauty. Listen, I don't want you to get all weird on me and what not but I'm not trying to flirt with you or anything. I just wanna use you as a model in all of my marketing collateral. For the last few months or so I've been on the search for the perfect Black woman to use in all of my branding.

There's just something about you. I can't quite put my finger on it but damn, I just think you'd make a perfect match."

"Wow!" Lacey was stunned. "I, ughh…I don't know what to exactly say. I really appreciate that, Derron. I really do. I'm just…" She paused. "Listen, can I be honest with you?"

"Sure…Wassup?"

Lacey took a deep breath. Did she want to go ahead and be that super-personal with him? Hell, at this point, she had absolutely nothing to lose.

"Well, I got fired today. So, I'm officially unemployed. I'm just a bit stressed out. That's all. I just don't know if I'll have the energy and mindset to give you what you're looking for. I appreciate the fact that you think I'm the perfect person for your new marketing initiative, but right now I just don't think I have the mental energy and capacity to commit to something like this."

"Oh wow, I'm so sorry to hear that. If I could give you any consolation, see the firing as a blessing in disguise. I've been in that position before."

"Really?"

"Yes. Really. I mean, I haven't always been *successful*, or whatever that fuck that means."

"Hrrrm...Interesting…," Lacey responded with a light smirk plastered across her bashful face.

The last thing Lacey expected at this moment was to have such a seemingly intimate conversation with someone who she envisioned just having rough sex with and then would move on. So, the more she listened to Derron speak, the more she became charged. At any moment she'd need to change out of her panties given how moist she was getting.

Although there was something about his aura (or maybe his persistence) that somewhat rubbed her the wrong way, Derron's charisma and charm was doing a number to her. Mind you, by this point she'd only had one interaction with the man. And now this was technically their second conversation.

Lacey reasoned that she was somewhat initially bothered by Derron to a degree because he seemed to be one of those cocky, arrogant, go-getter, A+ personalities. Lacey always had somewhat of an underlying fear of dating men like this, especially considering her past.

Her last relationship was a complete disaster. Initially, everything started out well. Ken was his name. He was an accountant for KPMG, a major accounting firm in Downtown Chicago. He was everything Lacey ever wanted out of a man, or at least she thought. Ken was the quintessential alpha male. Sure of himself. Career-oriented. Early on

in their relationship, he consistently displayed unfettered chivalry.

But after a year of dating, Ken devolved into a complete asshole. His sense of pride and self-confidence transformed into microaggressions and occasional verbal abuse. He always picked and prodded Lacey for her fluctuating weight. He also used to chastize her for not being aggressive enough when it came to her career.

But even with all of that, Lacey stayed by his side and was willing to marry him. Ken, on the other hand, grew tired of her and eventually left her…for his racially ambiguous co-worker.

Lacey didn't know what race the side chick was; she'd just seen a plethora of her pictures on Facebook and Instagram. She could've been half-black, half-white (or mixed with Hispanic or Asian possibly). And now they were married with two twin daughters. Crazy thing was, Ken was arrogant and cocky enough to even invite Lacey to his wedding.

Hearing and looking at Derron triggered Lacey into rehashing those memories. The last thing she wanted to do was put herself into a situation that was going to end up being eerily similar to Ken.

"I'm dead serious…," Derron said.

"So, what did you do before you were a successful business owner?" Lacey asked.

"Damn, that's a long story…Let's see, where do I start…Well, after high school I enlisted into the military. Then after I got out, I worked at a few call centers and gyms before I saved up enough money to open up my gym."

"Did you go to college?"

"Yeah…University of Tampa. You?"

"Howard."

"Wow! That's funny."

"Why?"

"'Cause I got a full-ride scholarship to go there. But I turned it down…"

"WHAT?!? Seriously?!?"

"Yes! Dead serious!"

"WOOOW!"

Derron and Lacey chatted for another hour, getting to know each other. Every second of their conversation further strengthened Lacey's growing attraction to the man. During the course of their conversation, Lacey finally agreed that she'd meet up with Derron tomorrow to start their intense workout regimen. Although she was still a bit apprehensive, she couldn't help but resist the man's pull. After all, between her getting fired and not having a man (and really some steady, consistent dick for over two years), she figured having a new friend and possible bae would be a new, fresh welcome in her

life.

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“OWW! Slow it down, papi! You’re gonna hurt me! Take your time putting it in!”

“Man, shut the fuck up. Why you ain’t sniff one of them poppers?”

“Look, dude, just put it in slow. You black niggas be havin’ too much dick sometimes.”

Derron was fully naked. Dick hard like a castle brick. He reached over to grab a bottle of water-based lube off his nightstand and then lathered his dick up. Last thing he wanted to do was have Javi, his Grindr hook up, in the ER with a bloody rectum.

With no condom on, Derron made sure every inch of his dick was coated with lube so that way he could enter the young Hispanic man’s boipussy with ease.Derron slapped his lubed-up dick against the boy’s hole to tease him and then eased right in.

“Ahhhh! Right there!” Javi moaned once he felt Derron slide up in him.

Derron glanced down and smiled. “Yeah, throw that boipussy back,” he said biting his lip. His eyes were now closed as he found himself enraptured in the bliss of blowing out the young guy’s bottom.

DING-DONG! DING-DONG! DING-DONG!

All of sudden Derron jumped, his eyes grew wide with terror and suspicion. “The fuck?” he rasped, wondering who in the hell was ringing his doorbell this time of the night. And ringing the damn door bell vicious as fuck, too! he thought.

“OPEN UP, YOU MOTHERFUCKER! YOU THOUGHT I WAS DONE WITH YOU!?!?!?”

It was Jennifer…

BANG! BANG! BANG!

Seemed like Jennifer wasn’t going to relent. She kept banging hard on his townhouse’s front door, trying her best to get Derron’s attention.

“OPEN UP! I KNOW YOUR ASS IN THERE!”

“FUCK!” Derron growled. “Ay, man. Put your clothes on and hide! I gotta go deal with this psycho bitch!” Derron said to dude.

“Man, I was looking forward to this shit for hours! Who the fuck is that? Your wife?” the young gay Latino guy asked.

“Man, just put your shit on and go hide in the closet! This bitch is crazy! And no, she ain’t my wife!”

“FUCKING LIAR! I should’ve known your ass was on the down low! I should expose you!”

Derron didn't have time for the bullshit, so all of a sudden, he grabbed the twinky Latino eighteen-year-old by his long black hair and yanked him out of the bed. “Man! GET YOUR SHIT AND HIDE BEFORE I CRACK YOUR FUCKIN’ RIBS AND HAVE YOUR ASS IN THE ER!”

“FINE! LET ME GO!” The gay Latino boy scurried to put his clothes on.

“IF YOU DON’T OPEN UP THIS DOOR, I’M GONNA EXPOSE YOU TO EVERYONE, YOU FUCK WAD!” Jenn could still be heard screaming through the townhouse front door.

Derron looked panicked as he rushed to put his clothes on. Once he and the Latino kid were dressed, he grabbed the boy and shoved him in his closet. “Just stay put! Look! I’m sorry about all of this!”

“Okay, but will you give me some dick when she leaves?”

“Yeah! Whatever! Just be quiet while I deal with this bitch!”

“Ok, papi!”

Derron quickly looked in his bedroom mirror hanging from his door. He adjusted his nightgown and then rushed through the townhouse’s dark living room. Once he got to the door, he peeped out and saw Jennifer standing there with a gun in her hand. His eyes grew wide again with terror. “Fuck, this bitch is crazy!” he mumbled.

Chapter Seven

"Jenn...Please, what do you want?!? Do you know what fucking time it is?!?"

"YES I KNOW WHAT THE FUCK TIME IT IS! NOW OPEN UP, YOU BLACK PIECE OF SHIT!"

"NO! JENN! JUST LEAVE! And why the fuck do you have that gun?!?"

"Because! I'm gonna kill you if you don't fucking open up! THAT'S WHY!"

Derron continued to stare at the crazed white girl out of the front door's peephole. A part of him wanted to run and get his gun and pop the white bitch in her skull.

With a million security cameras running in and out of the building, Derron figured he could easily argue self-defense if he shot her to death. However, he was too nervous to even move an inch. There was no telling what Jenn was liable to do at this point and he didn't want to risk her shooting into the peephole, let alone the door.

All of sudden, Jenn's disposition changed. Her rage went silent and she broke down into screaming tears. "PLEASE, Derron, PLEASE! Don't do this to me! I need you in my life!"

"Jenn! You need to take yo ass home! You're too drunk and high to be acting like this! Are you sure you're even fucking pregnant?!?!" Derron knew the white girl was high out of her mind. Her manic behavior combined with her wobbliness was a dead giveaway. Besides, he'd seen her before in a similar state, minus the gun.

"YES! I am pr-pregnant!" Jenn paused for a moment and raised the hand holding the gun to her mouth. She belched and began to cry again. "Please! My family doesn't even want to bother with me anymore because I told them I got pregnant by a black guy! Open it! We are MEANT TO BE TOGETHER, DERRON! I HAVE NO ONE ELSE NOW BUT YOU!"

"Jennifer! Please! We can talk about this shit in the morning, but right now, you need to go home! If the fuckin' neighbors here you carrying on, they are going to call the cops. You will get arrested. You wanna get fuckin' arrested?"

"WHY WOULD I GET ARRESTED?!? YOU ARE SUPPOSED TO PROTECT ME! AND I'M A WHITE GIRL! WHITE GIRLS DON'T GET

ARRESTED! REMEMBER, NIGGER!?!? NIGGERS GET ARRESTED! NOT WHITE GIRLS! WHITE GG-GG-GGIRLS ARE INNOCENT, REMEMBER?"

By now Derron knew he wouldn’t be able to bargain or talk down Jenn's obviously crazy ass. She was way too drunk and high, completely out of her mind, and probably didn't know half the shit she was saying. It was all muddled garbage coming from her mouth but Derron still didn't want to push her further given she had a loaded .38 caliber in her hand.

"Jenn...Please...Just do us all a favor and put the gun down. And then I will let you in...Okay?"

"NO! You know what! I don't wanna be with you no more! In fact, I don't wanna live no more! If you don't wanna have my baby, then my life is pretty much fuckin' ruined!" Jenn said as she slowly raised the .38 to her right temple.

Derron's eyes widened in fear. "Wait, Jenn, what are you doing?!?! Put the gun down!"

"NO! FUCK YOU, DERRON!"

POW!

Chapter Eight

Without even giving one final warning, Jenn pulled the trigger and instantly blew her brains out of her skull. Derron instantly collapsed to the ground and ran for cover. Panicking, his breathing was rapid and his heart damn near exploded out of his chest. The gunshot was loud and deafening but then he heard another voice...

"BOY! YOU SEE WHAT YOU DID! NOW GET UP AND TAKE YO CLOTHES OFF!"

It was the deep and terrifying voice of Derron's father...

Suddenly, an apparition of Derron's stern father hovered over him. The man was very tall, at least a good seven feet, and had the build of Goliath. He was bald, dark-skinned and had eyes yellower than the sun. The tell-tell sign of years of alcoholism. The father was dressed in a white button-down dress shirt and some black slacks. He began to take off a belt. Then he unbuttoned his pants. Derron, frozen, watched his father in terror as he made his way closer and closer to him.

Everything seemed to be caving in. So much sweat drizzled down Derron's face, you would've sworn he just emerged from swimming in a lake. A lake of fear though.

"No, daddy! NO! Please! No. It will hurt!"

"You messed up! I told you about messing with other people. Made that white bitch kill herself. Now you need to get yo ass tore up!"

"NO! Daddy, please no!" Derron begged and now his body wasn't just frozen, it was completely paralyzed and Derron couldn't move a single limb. Couldn't even close his eyes as he watched in horror his father fondle himself. "NOW TURN OVER, BOY! YOU GON GET IT!"

"NO!" Derron screamed, trying with every fiber in his mind, body, and soul to resist his father's looming sexual assault.

"SHUT UP! I SAID TURN THE FUCK OVER OR I'M GONNA KILL YOU!"

"NO, DADDY! PLEASE! IT'S GONNA HURT!"

His father reached down and grabbed Derron and threw him up against a wall. He then turned him over and whispered in a growl, "You know you like it…Now open up!"

"AHHHHHHH! NOOO!"

Chapter Nine

"AHHH! NO! GET OFF ME! GET THE FUCK OFF ME!" Derron screamed as he exploded out of his bed, hot and salty sweat layering his entire face and upper body. He dashed for his bathroom. He quickly turned the lights on and then lunged toward his sink. Running the coldest water possible, he began to splash himself with the icy water to help ease the panic attack he was having.

Jenn never showed up. Nor was he having gay sex. It was all a nightmare and nightmares like this were routine for Derron. He'd been having them since the age of nine.

"Baby, what's wrong?!?! Are you okay?" Erica said as she made her way into the bathroom to comfort Derron. She attempted to wrap her arounds around Derron's sweaty back and shoulders to hold him. But before she could embrace him and allay his fears, he viciously shoved her away screaming, "GET THE FUCK AWAY FROM ME! I GOT IT!"

"Damn! I am just trying to help!" Erica responded in shock as she threw her hands up.

"JUST LEAVE! Please! This is too much!" Derron screamed as he tried to control his rapid breathing.

"Do you need me to get you anything from the kitchen?"

"JUST FUCKING LEAVE, ERICA!"

"Okay! Damn!" Erica screamed as she spun on her feet and stormed out of the room and into the living room. This was the umpteenth time she had to deal with Derron and his crazy ass nightmares. Honestly, she didn't know if she couldn't quite deal with him anymore.

Yeah, Derron, he was rich, sexy, had a big dick. Sexy, boss nigga even ate ass and pussy like a death row inmate eating his last meal. But damn, these PTSD-induced panic attacks and nightmares ruined everything for her. Seeing him breaking down again like this made her realize enough was enough. She didn't feel comfortable fucking him anymore. Didn't even feel comfortable working at the gym anymore either. This was a side of Derron she hadn't seen before until they started sleeping together.

It took about a good twenty minutes before Derron could gather himself. Splashing sink water on his face wasn't enough to ease the horrid panic attack, so he opted to take a cold shower. Cold water, according to his therapist, helped with stimulating the vagus nerve. A

jacked up vagus nerve can cause all types of issues, anxiety and panic attacks included, his psychiatrist said. Only solution was a high dose of meds along with some alternative treatments...which included long, ice cold showers. Derron absolutely hated them but they seemed to be the only thing to work. The medicine worked here and there. But shit, truth be told, weed was more beneficial than those damn anti-anxiety medications.

Derron made his way out of the shower, dried off and quickly put on a set of bedtime clothes – a black Hanes tank top and some dri-fit gray boxers.

He then quietly made his way out into the living room and saw Erica staring oddly at the television screen. She was tuned into BET. Music nor sitcoms were playing. Just con artist-Christian evangelist informercials were running. Despite it being nearly 3:30 AM, she was wide awake, ready to run her mouth once Derron got settled. She noticed Derron creeping into the kitchen.

Derron flicked the kitchen light on and meandered toward the fridge and opened it. He searched for some orange juice. That was another thing...Doc said that sometimes orange juice after a bad panic attack can help reduce the crazy flight of hormones. Derron went through at least four cartons a week.

He grabbed a carton of Tropicana orange juice and closed the fridge. Soon as the door closed, Erica was standing there off to his side with her arms folded, her foot rapidly tapping against the cold hardwood floor.

"Look, I think we need to talk," Erica said.

Derron closed his eyes and exhaled. He knew he kind of fucked up by shoving her in such a callous way. "Yo..Look...I'm sorry I screamed at you. My bad...That was just a horrible nightmare. I don't know how much longer I can take it."

"Well, you have been going to the doctor, right?"

"Of course..."

"How about you get a new one?"

"What are you talking about, woman? Dr. Muhammad is one of the best PTSD therapists out there."

"Well, why aren't these crazy ass dreams of yours going away? I mean, you've tried everything. Medicine. Meditation. Yoga. Weed. Cold Showers. You even got a service dog."

Coincidentally, out of nowhere, Saul, a black Labrador retriever made his way into the kitchen and snuggled up against Derron.

Derron looked down and grinned hard at the dog, temporarily suspending his anxiety. "Attaboy," Derron said with a huge smile still on his face as he ran his hand through Saul's well-trimmed back. "All the things you mentioned work. So what's the issue?"

"Okay, well, if they're working, why in the hell are you still having these attacks, Derron? Something's gotta be off!"

"You know..." Derron shook his head. "You really got some fucking nerve. My father raped me day in and day out from the age of nine till fifteen. I served two tours in Iraq and Afghanistan. I saw motherfuckers get their legs and arms blown off into pieces. I saw bodies of dead children laid out in the streets of Baghdad. Are you that much of a simple, dense bitch to not understand that I'm gonna have these types of nightmares for the rest of my life? Fucking women, I swear," Derron grumbled and took a gulp from the Tropicana container as he continued to rub Saul.

Erica's face bent into disgust. "Ummm...Excuse me...Who the fuck are you calling a bitch?"

"Look. What the fuck do you want from me, Erica?"

"No! Do not try to change the fucking subject! What makes you think you have the right to call me a fucking bitch?!? If I'm a bitch, your mother is a bitch! NOW! How about that you piece of—"

Without even thinking, Derron flung the carton of orange juice at Erica, completely blinding her before she could see what Derron was about to do next.

"AHHH!" she screamed and before she could ascertain what was happening exactly, Derron had already grabbed the woman and slammed her against the fridge. His grip tightened around her throat. Pulpy orange juice drizzled down her face as her brown eyes amplified with terror.

"Don't you ever put my mother's name in your fucking mouth or I'll —"

"You'll do what? Kill me? Go right ahead, you fuckin' lunatic! she cried.

Derron cocked back his fist and threw a punch, but before he could bash Erica's skull in, she quickly moved out of the way and escaped his grip. "YOU'RE FUCKING CRAZY! DON'T CALL ME, TEXT ME, OR ANYTHING. AND I QUIT. YOU NEED FUCKING HELP, PSYCHO!" she screamed as she dashed toward the townhouse's front door. She quickly opened it and darted out.

Derron hadn't noticed earlier, but Erica was already dressed and ready to leave.

Derron ran behind her and made his way out in the hallway. "AND DON'T COME BACK TO MY MOTHERFUCKIN' PLACE OR ASK ME FOR MONEY, YOU BROKE ASS BITCH! I CAN'T STAND YOU FUCKIN' BITCHES!" he screamed.

Erica turned around and said back, "FUCK YOU, FAG! BISEXUAL ASS GAY ASS NIGGA! GO SUCK A DICK! I SHOULD POST THAT ALL OVER SOCIAL MEDIA!"

"WHATEVER, BITCH!" Derron screamed. "WACK ASS HOE! PUSSY IS GARBAGE, TOO!"

Derron stormed back into his townhouse and slammed the door shut.

Saul strolled to Derron and rubbed against his leg. Derron looked down and a heavy scowl abruptly came across his face. Derron, without hesitation, kicked Saul. "FUCK OUT HERE! LEAVE". Saul burst out into a relentless whimper, reeling in intense pain from the kick.

Chapter Ten

Lacey rummaged through her bedroom's closet looking for the right workout outfit. Something slightly tantalizing to put on for the evening. Homegirl didn't want her outfit to be too super-obvious in revealing her intentions. However, taking the advice of Alexandria, Lacey didn't want give off basic bitch-frumpy girl vibes.

After talking last night to Mr. Derron, Lacey was now convinced he was feeling her. At least she hoped that was the case…

So, with the start of her training program with him being about a good two hours away, Lacey definitely didn't want to squander the opportunity. First impression is the best impression. Although she was just exercising, still, her outfit had to be right and tight. Alexandria had planned on coming over to help Lacey put on the right outfit but she got caught up with work at the last minute. So now Lacey was left up to her own to figure this outfit situation out.

"Hrrrm, maybe this top with these leggings...UGHH! I need new fucking clothes!" Lacey complained scanning her stiff-smelling closet.

Most of the clothes Lacey had were suited strictly for work purposes. But now without a job, those weren't of any use. What she needed right now was a bad ass workout outfit and that she didn't have.

Lacey never bothered to invest in high quality workout outfits like Alexandria. She'd be damned if she was going to spend $50 on a pair of tights or $200 on a pair of running shoes. But now, cautiously perusing her closet for the perfect outfit made her regret not at least considering buying decent workout outfits and kicks to match them. Aside from Alexandria, Marshall's and TJ Maxx were Lacey's best friends, and if she could find what she considered decent clothes and shoes at the aforementioned discount stores, she was going to get them.

Lacey couldn't find what exactly what she was looking for and with time not on her side, she just resigned to putting on a pair of slightly faded leggings. This time though, she wasn't going to weary some hole-filled t-shirt like she did the last time; she was going to at least put on a nice-looking tank top she did luckily buy some time ago.

~

"Ms. Lacey...So nice to see you again!" Derron announced with a huge smile planted on his chiseled face.

“Hey there, Derron! How’s it going?” Lacey replied as she walked through the doors of the gym in a rush. She didn't anticipate Derron being at the front desk.

The receptionist, Erica, was there seated by his side. Just moments ago, the two were casually flirting with each other, but now Derron presumably had to put on his CEO-Gym Instructor facade. Can’t let clients know he was fucking his staff…

Erica threw her gaze toward her bright iMac screen and pretended as if she was doing real work. Truth be told, she spent most of her day browsing Facebook, Instagram and The Shaderoom.

“I’m great! And yourself?” Derron said.

“Can’t complain! Business still doing well?"

Derron let out a slight odd chuckle and lifted his brow in response to what he thought was somewhat of an off question. "Of course!" he responded, his intense eyes skimming Lacey up and down. "Business is always well." He paused for a second with his attention still latched to Lacey's body. "Sorry, I can't help but notice...Have you been losing weight?" he asked, but he knew the woman wasn't losing weight. That was just his way to open her up and make her feel somewhat special.

Out of nervousness, Lacey lowered her head and snickered. "Uhhh, not really. Why?" She pulled her t-shirt and took a quick pinch at her side, wondering if maybe she was losing weight.

No one else had told her lately that she was slimming down, not even Alexandria. And Alexandria would've been the first to notice because she was a very visual person. Someone who always had a penchant for making relentless commentary about everyone's appearance. So, if someone was going to notice any weight loss, it definitely would’ve been bestie.

Derron tightened his mouth and bobbed his up and down, projecting slight curiosity as if he was trying to figure out why Lacey looked different, or seemed "slimmer". But it was all a tactic in his game of seduction. He continued, "Hrrrm, I don't know...There's something that just looks different about you. You sure you haven't been losing weight? Have you been cheating on me with another gym?" A shady ass smile grew on his chiseled, shaven brown face.

"Of course not! Besides, I don't think another gym would offer me free personal training sessions on top of free workout gear and shoes. New $400 shoes at that."

"Hah, you still on that? I thought we moved on from that..."

"I mean, how can I? I've never even had an ex do something like

that for me?"

"Sounds like all you dated were assholes."

Lacey shrugged her shoulders and grinned. "Maybe..."

"Anywho...Let's get the workout started. Have you ever heard of metabolic conditioning?"

"Nah. What's that?"

"Hah! Guess you'll see in fifty minutes." Derron led Lacey upstairs and to a private workout room.

Now, as the two continued to talk, Erica was still there at the sign-in desk, pretending as if she was minding her own damn business. But she wasn't… Shit, why would she? Just by taking a quick glance at how Lacey was acting, she could tell that Lacey had a thing for him. And she could also tell Derron was being very flirtatious in his own unique, subtle manner.

Last night, after their huge fight, Erica found herself running back to Derron. After she bid him farewell and called him all types of crazy, deranged faggots, she came to her senses (really a bittersweet realization) at the bus stop. Within forty seven minutes of waiting out in the chilly Chicago dark and no bus in sight (CTA budget cuts made bus service during the night a rare commodity), Erica walked her desperate, lonely, broke ass right back to Derron's place so she could apologize for her senseless, careless rant.

Guess waiting at a bus stop with crackheads, winos and struggling single mothers would make you think twice about ending a seemingly serious relationship. Especially with someone who not only was supplying you with bomb dick but with money to put in your scant checking account. You already know Derron definitely could supply both in abundance: otherworldly sex matched with endless amounts of financial support. In her mind, Derron possessed a lot of potential to be a great husband and father one day despite his demons.

Truth was, Erica was just simply motivated by money and wanted to be boo'ed up with someone who she perceived as having status. Derron had a feeling her bum ass would be right back to and wasn't shocked when she came knocking on his door, apologizing for her hurtful words. Within seconds of her sorry ass apology, Derron knew he had the woman by the grip of his hand. The two had crazy make up sex, did multiple lines of cocaine, slept for a few hours, awoke, fucked some more, ate breakfast and headed to the gym.

"Hrrrm," Erica grumbled as she stared off her screen and then down at her cell phone. "He must wanna fuck this bitch, too. We'll see about that though..." She'd be damned if she was going to let another bitch stand in the way of her plan to become the future Mrs. Harrington. Little did she know she had competition from more than just Lacey - multiple women **AND** men were in the race to make

Derron theirs.

~

"Like...Oh. My. God...Derron...I cannot feel my face or my legs! What the hell did you do to me?!?"

Lacey felt like she was seconds away from passing out. It was just Derron and Lacey inside of a private room inside Derron's gym. That first workout with Jake some weeks ago didn't compare to this crazy ass, hardcore workout Derron had her doing.

"Work you out like you are supposed to be worked out!" Derron chuckled and locked his gaze onto Lacey, taking in her sweaty yet sensual form. Derron was bullshitting Lacey though. She didn't need to lose a single pound.

The private room was usually reserved for special personal training clients who paid good money to get one-to-one consultation from Mr. Harrington himself. The room had all types of specialized equipment that other rooms didn't carry, and Derron used every single machine in the room to overwhelm his new client.

"Wow, shit! I feel like I went to hell and back," Lacey said and then paused as she looked off at nothing in particular. "I feel...I feel...oddly good though. Like euphoric."

Derron smiled and said, "Yup, that's those endocannabinoids and endorphins. Runner's high. Also you probably have an elevated HGH level which is making you feel slightly nauseous. Trust me, this type of workout, despite it only being less than an hour, is like the equivalent of working out for three."

"Damn," Lacey responded not understanding not a single damn thing Derron just said. "Like, honestly, I have no idea what you just said but I'll take it."

"I'm glad you'll take it," Derron said as he shook his head in affirmation.

"So, when is our next session?" Lacey asked as she wiped her brow of sweat while trying to contain her still somewhat heavy breathing.

"We can shoot for tomorrow. How's that?"

"That's fine..."

"Cool..."

The two went silent and just stood there together in the room, looking at each other. It was already obvious by now they were feeling each other. Lacey was now just waiting for the opportunity for Derron to make his move.

"Well, I'll see you tomorrow then...," Derron said and then pursed his lips. He began to make his way out of the studio.

"Okay," Lacey said as she followed him. For a second she just stood

there, but then realized she should've been exiting the room, too. She eventually trailed Derron and then made her way downstairs to the women's locker room to change and head back home.

~

Darkness concealed the Chicago skies. The moon barely glistened, but light pouring from Chi-town's massive skyscrapers burst everywhere.

Lacey was sitting on Lake Shore Drive in heavy traffic, contemplating her session with Derron. She was a bit disappointed Derron didn't go in and ask for her number. Maybe he wasn't attracted to me? Maybe he has a wife? Kids? Is he gay? Nah he can't be gay. He just seemed too into me. These were all constant ruminations going off in the back of Lacey's mind as her radio blared.

Buzz. Buzz. Buzz.

Lacey looked down and grabbed her cell phone. It was Alexandria. Of course it was, she thought. She was obviously calling to the get the scoop on the how the session went.

"Wassup, girl?" Lacey answered.

"Okay, so you all have a date coming up right?"

"No...," Lacey responded flatly and rolled her eyes. She huffed. "Not at all," she grunted.

"Wait...Wait, wait, wait...What?!? This nigga gave you free personal training sessions, some expensive ass running shoes and some gloves and the nigga ain't even ask you for your number???!?"

"No!"

"What THE fuck?!?"

"Girl, please. You just screamed and gave me a headache,"

"My bad." Alexandria paused. "Girl, I swear this nigga was gonna go in and ask you for your number and everything."

"You know, the more I think about it, the more I think I should've never listened to you. Girl, you gassed me up."

Alexandria smacked her teeth. "Girl, please stop it. You always gotta come back with something negative! I ain't never gassed yo ass up. You gassed yourself up, boo! Besides, give it time! The man is OBVIOUSLY feeling you. And isn't this the FIRST personal training session anyway?"

"Yeah," Lacey replied, not liking Alexandria's last statement.

"When's the next one scheduled?"

"Tomorrow," Lacey said in a depressed tone.

"Well, there's still hope. Me on the other hand; I'm going out with Mr. Jake in an hour. Wish me luck."

Lacey rolled her eyes and then fake smiled. "Good luck!"

"Don't be sarcastic."

"How you know I'm being sarcastic."

"Girl, we've been friends since forever. I know when bestie is being sarcastic. Anyways, I gotta finish getting ready. I just got a yoni steam to make my kitty extra tight for tonight! I'm trying to snatch his fine ass up pronto."

"Girl, bye! You doin' the most now!"

The two hung up.

Lacey arrived at her apartment about a good thirty minutes later. Still somewhat sweaty from the intense workout, she didn't hesitate to run up to stairs and jet straight for her shower.

After showering, Lacey sat on her couch watching a rerun of Fresh Prince of Bel-Air. Truth be told, she should've had her ass on her laptop looking for a new job. Then again, she figured with getting a severance from her job plus getting unemployment from the state, she just needed to relax an get her mind together at least for the next thirty days.

Lacey leaned up and grabbed a half-smoke joint she had resting on her coffee table in an ash tray, lit it up and took a few pulls just to simmer her mind down. She changed the channel to CNN and watched Don Lemon rant about Trump until her eyes closed.

~

Knock! Knock! Knock!

"The hell?" Lacey groaned as her eyes instantly grew wide open at the sound of the three knocks on her apartment's front door. She gazed around for a bit, her mind still very much hazy and confused from the weed. She didn't know exactly what time it was, but all she knew it was very late and definitely wasn't expecting any company.

She got up and meandered over to the door. "Who is it?" she asked before she looked out the peephole. She got to the door, then squinted her right eye into the peephole. She instantly gasped once she saw the person standing there.

Derron...

"Umm....Hey, Derron. What are you doing here? How do you know where I live?" Lacey said nervously. Okay, this nigga was definitely crazy, she thought, her heart pumping hard like an oil rig in the middle of Texas.

"Hey, sorry, it's an emergency! But you left your purse back at the gym!"

"What?"

Derron held up a cheap, off brand black purse to the peephole.

Lacey raised a brow. She opened the door and Derron handed the purse to her. "I've been trying to call you all night but your phone

went straight to voice mail."

"Ohhhhhhh! I'm so sorry! I didn't hear it…Maybe it died?"

"Well, I don't wanna keep you long, but I just didn't want you to feel all flustered and what not once you realized you left it. I lost my wallet one time in the airport and it was the worse feeling ever."

"Yeah, I can imagine! Well, I really appreciate it, Derron. I was nervous for a second. I thought you were stalking me," Lacey chuckled as she slightly blushed.

"Nah. Not a stalker here. Just very attentive...That's all," Derron said and bit his lip. The two continued to stare at each for a second before Lacey cleared her throat and said, "Well, thanks again. I guess I'll see you in the AM?"

"Yup!" Derron laughed and then said, "Have a good night, Lacey... I really appreciate it." He smiled, spun on his feet and then began to walk off.

Now is the time, Lacey! Go get him! Stop waiting for the right time! Say something! she thought. "Wait...Derron!"

Derron stopped dead in his tracks and then turned around, looking right at Lacey with a flat expression on his face. "Everything alright?" he asked.

Lacey ran down the hallway and without hesitation, she jumped on the man and landed all types of kisses all over his face. "Stop playing games with me! I just want you to fuck the shit out of me!" she screamed.

~

Lacey gasped as her eyes exploded open in terror. She clasped her chest, feeling her heart beat ferociously. Her breathing was rapid. She was having a dream. A lustful dream. But the dream was a tad terrifying. Why? She never would in a thousand years be that impulsive to jump all over a nigga, especially a nigga she didn't know like that.

The TV was still blaring. This time informercials were on though. Lacey grabbed her cell phone off the coffee table as she yawned. She looked down at the time. It was 2:13 AM. She had to be up at eight to meet Derron at the gym by nine. "Ughhh!" she groaned as she got up from her couch and made her way to her bedroom.

Chapter Eleven

"Damn, you smell so good today," Derron moaned as he ran his nose up and down Erica's slender neck.

Just taking in sniff after sniff was making his dick super-hard. The both of them were sitting on his living room couch, passively watching a rerun of Family Matters.

Weeks passed since Derron started training Lacey but he still hadn't decided to make his real moves on her yet… And that was because he was still very much enamored with Erica. Hell, anyone would given how she was all up on his dick 24-7.

Derron's money and dick magic had transformed the desperate girl into a maid, sex slave, consoler, and even to a degree, a de facto mother who was there at his beck and call.

Truth was, Erica actually didn't mind putting in the grind to keep Derron. Despite his hiccups, she just knew with time, eventually he'd come to his senses and put a ring on her finger.

However, she was feeling a bit different about her situation with Derron lately. And that was because of one person who recently came into the picture: Lacey. Erica didn't like Derron training her ass at all.

Why?

It was something about Lacey that rubbed Erica the wrong way. Erica noticed every time Lacey came to the gym, she just seemed to be all up on Derron. *What's to this bitch?* she wondered every time Lacey brought her ass around.

Derron hadn't noticed, but Erica wasn't into the passionate kissing Derron was giving her at the moment. "Man, I wish I could just cancel everything right now and fly us to the Dominican Republic. We need a baecation," he snickered, continuing to plant succulent kisses all over Erica's neck and cheeks.

Erica didn't say anything. She just sat there, rolling her eyes in her mind. *Yeah, whatever, nigga. Take that new bitch to the gym,* she thought. The gaze in her eyes was flat and despondent. She kept her unblinking attention locked onto the television.

Seconds later, Derron eventually picked up the silent attitude. "What's wrong?" he asked, momentarily pausing the kisses.

"Ughh, Nothing...," she lied.

Derron didn't buy it for not a single second.

"Nah...Something's wrong. Any other time you'd be all over me. But today, you just seem off." He looked her up and down and then asked, "You on your period or somethin'?"

Yeah, that was such an asshole remark to make. Of course a woman didn't need to be on her period to seem *off,* and Derron definitely knew this. Guess that was his way of trying to fuck with and get a rise out of her (in a somewhat playful way). But Erica ignored his ass. She kept watching TV. "No," she eventually responded.

"So…What's the issue then?" He let out a chuckle and then asked, "My breath stink or something?"

Erica moved an inch away from Derron and rolled her eyes to the ceiling. "Ughh, Derron. No. Please, I'm just watching TV. That's it."

Awkward silence filled the room.

Saul, Derron's service dog, was off on the side of the couch watching TV along with Erica. The dog looked over at Derron, Derron stared right back at him.

"Go away, Saul," Derron groaned. The obedient dog followed his master's command by swiftly making his way into the kitchen.

"Stop lying to me," Derron said in a more serious tone. "What's really going on?"

"Are you fucking that bitch?" Erica came right out the gate, ready to go to war for her man.

"Excuse me??!?" Derron barked back. "Yo, what the fuck are you talking about right now?"

"Don't play stupid, Derron."

Derron shook his head in confusion. "I'm confused. What in the hell are you talking about?"

Erica spun her face right into Derron's. "The new bitch! Lacey or whatever the fuck her name is! I swear every time she comes to the fucking gym, she's all over you. So, answer my question: are you fucking her, too?"

Derron continued shaking his head in disbelief. Erica wasn't lying though and Derron knew she wasn't. But he wasn't going to get exposed. He tried to play it off by saying, "Okay, now you know what, you tweakin'."

"Nah, nigga! I'm not fucking tweakin' at all!"

"So what makes you think I'm fucking that woman? I don't even know her!"

"Hah! Are you kidding me right now? Yeah, you think I'm stupid as fuck!"

"Erica!"

"Derron! I know you are! I can tell! How? Because it's the way you smile and watch her every time she comes in! And she does the same shit, too! She looks at you funny! She smiles and laughs at all of your

wack ass jokes!"

"Erica—"

"Nah, nigga! I'm not done yet! Let me finish," Erica interrupted. "I've been messing with you for so long. I do everything for you. Clean your apartment. Cook. Watch your dog. Fuck you when you wanna be fucked. Suck your dick. I even fucking eat your ass! Participate in all of those fucking threesomes and foursomes. I'm already compromising my health by being with your bisexual ass in the first place. I should've listened to Kimora. She was right. So damn right!"

Derron grew pissed second by second as Erica continued to rant. Eventually he couldn't take her shit anymore, so he had to put an end her *senseless* ranting.

"You know what. I just think you need to leave. Get your shit and get out," Derron snarled, pointing his finger to his bedroom. He took his arm from around her neck, got up and made his way into the kitchen.

Erica didn't move though. She had her arms folded and her gaze locked onto the television. "No! I'm not leaving!" she yelled, shaking her head. "You're not just gonna kick me out 'cause I'm calling you out on your shit!"

"Look, man! You don't know what the fuck you're talking about and I'm not about to stand here and let you fuckin' disrespect me over some stupid ass allegations. Lacey is a fucking client. That's all! You already know I'm using her for our marketing campaign."

Erica smacked her teeth and said, "I don't believe you."

"Well, don't believe me then. But you still need to get the fuck out of my house though!"

"Derron. No. Besides, the moment I leave, in an hour you're gonna be calling me, wanting me to come over to fuck you and grill you a steak. So, just go ahead, take your meds, smoke a blunt, chill out and then we can move the fuck on."

"Oh, really?" Derron replied.

"Yeah...Really!" Erica responded with brazen confidence.

The apartment was quiet again. The tongue-tied quietness didn't bother Erica at all since now she was celebrating her *victory*. Short-term victory though. But Derron wasn't just gonna let what she said slide.

Nonetheless, Erica finally said what she had stored up in her for some time now. And it just felt so good and liberating cursing Derron the fuck out. Somehow, she assumed she shut Derron down and he was going to acquiesce to her anger. Who or what knows made her think Derron was going to bow down to her as if he was some scrawny simp, but by the silence still present in the living room, she just knew he wasn't going to do or say shit else. So, she just sat there and

continued to watch TV.

All of suddenly, Derron lunged at the couch and yanked Erica right off it from behind, slamming her to the ground. "AHHHH! LET ME GO, BASTARD!" she screamed, trying hard to fight off his grip.

"Bitch, I told you to get the fuck out of my house! You thought I was fucking playing with you?!?"

"CRAZY ASS NIGGA! I AIN'T GOING NO WHERE! CALL THE COPS IF YOU WANT TO. I'LL JUST RUN TO FB AND POST THOSE PICTURES!"

"What pictures?!?" Derron was suddenly caught by surprise.

"That's what I thought!" Erica spat and a huge devilish grin came across her face despite. Even with Derron hovering over here, ready to crush her skull in if she continued her defiance, she just laid on the floor, snickering as if she won. Again, short-term victory. She had no idea who was she was truly messing with.

"Oh, so that's the fucking game you wanna play?!?" And just like that, Derron grabbed her off the ground and without hesitation, he punched her right in her mouth. Erica flew down to the ground again.

"GET UP, BITCH! Since you wanna go there, let's go there!"

Erica, shocked by the punch, tried to crawl for cover in an adjacent corner. "NO! Derron, no! Please, NO! I was just playing—

"

"Nah! NO THE FUCK YOU WEREN'T!" Derron growled, making his way closer and closer to Erica.

She tried to get up and run for cover but Derron dashed toward her, grabbed her and dragged her down the hallway of his townhouse. Erica screamed for help but those sharp pleas were muzzled by Derron's incessant punching and kicking. Derron snapped. His PTSD blacked him all the way the fuck out. He no longer had any regard for the fact that Erica was a slender-framed woman and he was an ex-soldier with a massive disposition toward being a violent monster.

"DON'T. YOU. EVER. THREATEN. ME. AGAIN!" Derron punched the damn near lifeless woman at each instance of his thunderous, pronounced words.

Within seconds she passed out and was lying in the middle of the hallway in a pool of her own blood streaming from her mouth and nose. A few of her ribs were cracked. Sharp pain emanated all throughout her back and stomach. Both of her eyes were now puffy and black-reddish.

Derron hovered over here, shaking and sweating, his fists still balled up, ready to go back to war if she suddenly showed any signs of resistance. "SEE WHAT YOU MADE ME DO!" he yelled.

Erica opened her hazy, bloody eyes and gazed at Derron as he still hovered over her. She didn't say anything; she just cried and

attempted to get on her knees to crawl to the front door. "You...You sss-ssaid you would never hit me...You lied@" she cried in a heavy stutter. She made a few crawls toward the living room.

Derron, breathing hard, ogled the battered woman. And within seconds, as sanity set in, he realized what he'd done. He had a complete meltdown, blacked out and beat the woman to a pulp.

"Oh my God! Oh my God! I'm ssss-ssorry," Derron sobbed, throwing his hands up to the sides of his face in surprise of his brutality. "Please, I'm sorry! I—I, umm, I need to get you to a doctor. QUICK!" Derron then dashed toward Erica and tried to help her off the ground.

"GET OFF ME. LEAVE ME ALONE!" Erica yelled as she finally was able to muster up the strength and run for cover.

"Please! Erica! I need to take you to a hospital!" Derron cried as he ran up from behind her and held her tightly.

"LET. ME. GO!" she screamed.

Derron forcefully lodged kisses all up and down Erica's neck. "I'm so sorry, babe! I'm sorry! I swear to God! Please don't call the cops on me! I need help! PLEASE!"

"Please, Derron! Just let me go! PLEASE!" Erica begged and cried but Derron didn't relent.

"No! Please don't leave me, baby! I'm SORRY! Please, I'm SORRY!" Derron wept uncontrollably but he still didn't let Erica go.

In fact, as she continued to beg and scream for him to let her go, he budged her toward a wall in the hallway of the townhouse, eternal apologies blasting out of his mouth like lava from a volcano.

The crazy, violent nigga was so gone...So fucking far gone. Derron's delirious mind was now bent and twisted into trying to engineer the situation in his favor.

Why?

Because he now knew he fucked up big time. Like, BIG TIME!

See, once Erica managed to escape, Derron just knew she was going to run right around the corner to a local Chicago Police precinct. She'd confess in a loud roar right there in the lobby that she'd been attacked by a bipolar savage. Then, she'd give some zealous, possibly white racist detectives a detailed account of what happened. And then before you know it, cops were going to show up to his place, arrest him on site and ship his ass to Cook County Jail.

Just thinking of the spending a night, let alone a few hours locked up with a bunch of local ChiRaq crazies and gang members terrified the fuck out of Derron. Even with seeing all types of crazy shit in Iraq and Afghanistan – heads getting blown off, children getting massacred – Derron couldn't fathom the idea of sharing a cell with a nigga who had nothing to lose and everything to gain in the vicious streets of the Chi.

Oh, and as far as Cook County prosecutors here in Chicago –

they definitely didn't play when it came to domestic violence. Shit, truth be told, Derron knew that first hand because many moons ago he got into a similar predicament with an ex.

The bipolar, crazy ass nigga almost ended up serving jail time for an assault charge. However (and luckily), with the right amount of money and a good, well-connected Jewish lawyer, Derron managed to get the charges dropped. His ex-girlfriend/victim took back her story and even mangled a few details. A secret $150,000 settlement would make anyone shut the fuck up. And that she did. And she also skipped town once that $150,000 check hit her Bank of America checking account.

This time though, the consequence of his unrestrained and ruthless brutality was way too evident to make a detective or prosecutor look the other way. So what was going to be his next move? **Make love to her**. Yes, this nigga had no other choice but to use what he presumed was the power of his good dick to calm Erica down.

But that is considered rape.

Guess what though?

Derron didn't give a flying fuck. In his irrational mind, good lovin' will make any dark situation turn bright. So, after nonstop screams and yells, he quickly moved to squash her resistance and uninterrupted pleas for liberation.

"Please, baby, I'm sorry," he continued to apologize despite the fact he was holding her pinned up against the wall. And once again, he began planting kisses all over her, hoping the luscious, damp pecks would numb the pain wracking her entire body. Hell, numb the pain wracking her entire mind.

"Derron! Please, just let me go! Please!" Erica sobbed.

But Derron didn't stop.

Crazy as it may seem though, within seconds, Erica seemed to give up. *Just let the man do what he's gonna do and then run,* she thought.

By now, Derron had his pants pulled down, dick already hard. He quickly pulled Erica's pants down. As he continued kissing her from behind, he inserted himself to the battered woman. Her arousal wasn't there…at first.

Within seconds, something happened to her. A mysterious sense of joy overcame her. Now she found herself enjoying the *sex* her man was giving her to allay her fears. *Real women make sacrifices. You triggered him. This was your fault.* She was now making justifications for the violence and rape.

Chapter Twelve

"WHEWWW! I swear, these workouts don't seem to be getting any easier," Lacey howled as she finished a set of bicep curls. It was mid-morning and as usual, Lacey was deep in her workout session.

Derron chuckled. "Yeah, well, that's a good thing though. Never want to make the body get used to a workout. More confusion means more fat loss!"

"I can tell! Shit, since I started working out with you, I lost like ten pounds. I mean, damn, even my abs are starting to come in!"

Derron raised a brow in seductive suspicion. "For real?!? Let me see!" he exclaimed.

"See what?"

"Those abs! I wanna see if you are bullshitting me!" Derron responded. *I really wanna see that lil pussy*.

"Boy, I'm not about to pull up my shirt so you can see my abs."

"I just remembered! Today we need to take a progress shot!" Derron laughingly bellowed as he dashed from the workout bench next to Lacey. "Be right back," he said and exited out of the room. Moments later, he returned with a small digital camera in his hand. "So, yeah, go ahead and take the top off," he laughed.

Lacey didn't know whether or not this was just his way of flirting with her. However, since working out with him, it seemed to her that his *interest* in her seemed to dissipate. Maybe she misinterpreted his signals all along, however, she didn't care anymore. After that first week of working out with him, she was more thrilled to be going to the gym than trying to fuck him.

Since getting laid off, she hadn't made a single move yet to look for a new job. Shit, why would she? She figured she had more than enough money in the bank to last her for damn near a year. And she was also seriously contemplating moving back in with her mother and stepfather. They lived right around the corner in Bronzeville. Taking the advice of bestie, she was now using her time off from work to get her body and mind right.

Although Lacey was mortified to take her top off, this in actuality wasn't the first progress pic Derron took of her. He already had several of them, but none of them by this point were of her in just a sports bra. All the other times, Lacey just wore a basic tank top. But today,

all she had on was a t-shirt and a bra under.

Lacey meandered over to a mirror in the private personal training room and cautiously took off her shirt, wondering what exactly Derron was thinking. He wasn't paying her mind though; he was too busy playing around with the camera to adjust its settings.

"Okay, I'm ready," Lacey said once she had the shirt off. Derron looked up and smiled. "Damn, you weren't lying," he commented once he saw that her abs were truly manifesting.

"You sure you haven't been sweating in the sauna or something just to fool me?" Derron laughingly asked and held the camera up.

"Hah! No. I hate saunas. They smell like piss and balls!"

"Yeah, those nasty ass LA Fitness saunas smell like piss. But have you tried our infrared sauna here? It's completely different. And only one to three people can fit in there at a time. You should try it one day. I'll give you a complimentary session."

"Well, thank you," Lacey replied, still fretful that she was standing before the man, damn near topless.

Derron got close to her and scanned her up and down. "Wow. You...You are really getting cut the fuck up! You know...I have this idea, and I don't know if you'd be down for it."

"What's that?" Derron asked.

"You ever thought about doing a physique model competition?"

"Like bodybuilding? Getting up on a stage and showing off in front of judges?"

"Yeah! I actually plan on competing in one in a few months. And judging by your looks, it may not take that long for you to get into tip-top competition shape. Just a refining of your diet and some other tweaks, you will look *perfect*!"

"Oh, stop lying to me! I mean, I can see the results, but I don't think I can get that small."

"Really? I disagree. Everyone says that," Derron chuckled. "Anyways, we'll talk about that later. Stand up against the wall and hold your hands out. I really wanna post this picture ASAP!"

"Oh My God! NO! Please don't do that!"

"Why not?!?" Derron asked with a curious brow lifted. “You embarrassed or something? Lacey, you should be proud of yourself. You look gorgeous." Derron quickly corrected himself, "I mean *amazing*...You...look...amazing."

Lacey went silent for a second, her mouth partly hung open in surprise. *Damn, Derron **is** really feeling me, I can tell* now. "Well, thank you," she smiled bashfully as she held her arms out, ready for Derron to take the progress picture.

He took a few snaps at different angles. Once he got all the shots he wanted, he and Lacey went through them and deleted the ones he

thought had bad lighting or ones in which didn't really show much detail. The lighting in the room was a bit bad but it was the only spot in the studio that afforded him and her the privacy.

Lacey put her shirt back. Derron put all of the free weights and kettlebells spread all over the floor back onto their proper shelves. Once finished, he went back to his office. She went to go take a shower.

Lacey made her way out of the locker room and toward the receptionist desk to check out for the day. That was when saw Erica there behind the desk, staring hard at the computer screen. She hadn't seen her earlier. In fact, hadn't seen her in weeks. As she got closer, she noticed Erica had dark, puffy circles entombing her eyes. Her left eye was visibly swollen. Her mouth, too.

"Hey, girl! What's up!" Lacey said with a smile as she walked up to the desk. "I haven't seen you in a while! How's everything been?" Lacey asked, but also somewhat curious why her face seemed fucked up. *Damn, this chick look like a nigga beat the brakes off her ass,* she thought, still projecting a somewhat fake smile.

"I'm well," Erica lied. "Just got into a bad car accident some weeks back."

"Oh, I'm so sorry to hear that! Wow! I hope you weren't hurt too bad?"

"Nah, it's cool," she lied once more. "I just got bad whiplash and a few broken ribs," Erica said, quickly noticing out of the corner of her swollen eye that her boyfriend-abuser was making his way toward them.

"So, you down for the competition?" Derron asked Lacey, not even acknowledging Erica with a slight glance. Erica sunk her head down and stared at the computer screen, pretending as if she was doing work.

Lacey took a deep breath and looked up toward the ceiling, not knowing whether or not she was making the right decision. "Well...Yeah, I thought about it...Yes. I'll do it. I don't know what the hell I'm getting myself into, but I guess I'll do it. You only live once, right?"

"Great! I'm glad to hear that! I'll get Erica to print out all of the registration paperwork! The deadline to sign up is like a week from now!"

"Okay! What do I need to do to prepare?"

"We'll discuss that later, but for now, you just need to go get some rest because I know that workout was hard on you!"

"Yeah! It was!"

"Cool..." Derron paused and looked down at Erica. "Hey, go ahead and print out the NPCC registration forms and give them to her." He

then looked back at Lacey and said, "I'll see you tomorrow. I hate to be short but gotta run upstairs for a conference call!"

"Okay, no worries," Lacey responded with full bashfulness painted on her damp face.

"See you later then. I'll give you a call later," Derron exclaimed. His sexy ass grin revealed his perfect white teeth. He bit his lip and quickly looked Lacey up and down, just imagining what he would do to her body once he got the right chance.

"Cool," Lacey responded. Derron walked back to his office.

Lacey then turned her attention toward Erica and said, "Wow, he's something else, ain't he?"

Erica didn't respond – she just kept her silent, somewhat envious gaze attached to the hi-def Mac screen. Lacey picked up on the awkwardness. Seconds turned into a minute and Erica hadn't said anything despite the fact that Lacey was still standing there.

The laser printer sitting next to Erica began to roar, spitting out multiple sheets of paper. Lacey pulled her cell phone out to see if anyone had called or texted her. Nothing. Erica took the papers off the printer, stapled them and then threw them on the counter. "Here, fill these out and bring them back tomorrow," she said with a slight attitude.

"Okaayy..." Lacey said, noticing the snippy tone coming from Erica. She grabbed the paperwork and made her way out of the gym and into the parking lot. She pulled her phone out and dialed Alexandria. Lexy picked up after the first ring.

"Girl, wassup! I was just about to call you!" Alexandria exclaimed through the phone.

"Yeah, me, too! Ughh, Derron...He's just so confusing. Like, I get so many mixed signals from him! And this little rude ass bitch who works the counter...It's something about her I don't like. She gives me wrong vibes. Girl, I hadn't seen her in a few weeks and she stumbled her ass in today looking like Ike Turner came back from the dead to whip her flea market version of Alicia Keys' ass!"

Alexandria busted out laughing uncontrollably. "Girl! You are sooo STUPID! Leave that lil yella heffa alone! You know them mixies always think they somethin' fuckin' special!"

"Nah! Fuck her. I've been nothing but nice to her. Anyways, Derron. UGHHHH!"

"Oh, Lord! What happened this time?" Alexandria asked.

"Girl, we finally took a progress shot. With me just in a bra. And then he called me gorgeous but then quickly corrected himself. It's like, sometimes I feel like he wants to fuck the shit out of me, some days, I'm just wondering if this nigga is gay. Like damn, make your move already, homie!"

"Oh, Lacey...Girl, not all men are like that! Besides, Derron seems very conservative. That negro probably stays up in a church."

"I doubt it," Lacey responded, doubt lacing her response. "We talked about that before. In fact, just last night."

"Last night?!? Wait, bitch, you mean to tell me ya'll talk at night?!? What time at night?"

"Hah! Right! Midnight!"

"Okay, see, that's weird! Why is a nigga calling you at night like that but not wanting to at least—"

"LACEY! LACEY!" All of a sudden, Lacey heard a voice calling her name. She turned around and saw Derron running toward her. "Oh shit, hold on, girl. Derron's calling me."

"Hey," Derron said as he caught up to Lacey. He was somewhat out of breath but within seconds the shortness of breath went away. "I know this may seem a bit odd, but umm, what are you doing later tonight?"

Lacey stood there, silent for a second, her phone still glued to the side of her face. "Umm, nothing?" she replied, raising her brow out of curiosity. Her heart rate began to tick up. *Was he finally about to me her out?*

"Well, I know this may seem odd and I understand if you say no, but I would really like to take you out. I know it's kind of short-notice but I got two tickets to go see the Bad Boy Reunion at the UIC Pavilion. I was wondering if you wanted to accompany me?"

"GIRL, SAY YES! *CAN'T YOU SEE WHAT YOU DO TO ME*!"

Lacey heard Alexandria singing off beat to the 90s ballad by the group *Total.* Her natural impulse wanted her to tell her to shut the fuck up but she just stood there, looking at Derron with confusion but also joy.

"Sure!" she nervously responded, still holding the phone somewhat near her ear. Alexandria was ranting and raving. "YES! SHE SAID YES, YALL! I HEAR WEDDING BELLS!"

"You got someone on the phone?" Derron asked, somewhat hearing the indiscernible banter coming from Alexandria.

"Oh, I'm sorry. Hold up for a sec..." Lacey turned around and then whispered into the phone, "Girl, STOP IT! Let me call you back." She turned back to Derron and apologized once more. "I'm sorry, that was my friend. You remember her? Alexandria?"

Derron's face turned flat for a second and then he quickly put up a fake smile again. "Ummm…Oh yeah! She kind of reminds me of Steph Curry's wife...What's her name again?"

"Alexandria. And, yeah...She gets that all the time. She's crazy but cool though."

"That's cool. So, you are down for tonight then?"

"Yes! I love Total and Faith Evans! They were the business back then!" she exclaimed, bobbing her shoulders up and down as if she was dancing side by side with Puff Daddy himself.

Derron laughed. "WOOOW! OKAY! I see you, mama!"

Lacey burst into a laugh, too, and then said, "What time?"

"Can I pick you up around seven?"

"Sure thing!"

"Okay, cool..." Derron paused for a moment. "See you tonight then," he said biting his lips, looking Lacey up and down. He squinted his eyes into seductive slits and then walked off.

Lacey watched Derron walk off and the moment he went back into the gym, Lacey threw her hands up in excitement and roared, "YESSS!"

Chapter Thirteen

"Shit, shit, shit! AHHH! I'm cumming!" Derron growled as he shot his load down Erica's throat. His eyes rolled in the back of his skull and his entire body quaked like he was having an epileptic seizure.

The pair were locked in Derron's office. As usual, Derron needed to let off. Erica stood up and wiped her mouth free of semen and slobber. "You like that, baby?" she inquired, projecting a smile more fake than Chinatown knockoff Gucci purse.

"Hell fuck yeah!" Derron chimed as he stood up and swiftly pulled his boxers and pants up. But now that he secured his lunch orgasm courtesy of his de facto girlfriend, he had to get back to business. "But Look…I gotta run to my one PM. I'll catch up with you later," he uttered and then dashed out of the office.

"Okay…," Erica said. Once the door shut, she just stood there looking stupid once again. Poor, battered girl then limped over to the bathroom inside Derron's office. She went inside and closed the door. She stared at herself in the mirror as she slowly pulled a small knife from out from her pocket and looked at it. She stared back at herself in the mirror for a few moments before she started to cry. Her face was all the way messed up and she couldn't believe she had allowed herself to get this low in life.

Since that day Derron fucked her up, she pretty much had been camping out at his place, avoiding all interactions with her friends and family. She couldn't let them see her in her current state. If so, they would've been asking a million questions and she didn't have a solid lie to tell them. Yeah, she lied to Lacey about getting into a car accident, but obviously she didn't have a car. Her ass was a loyal CTA card holder.

She was willing to make the situation with her and Derron work, but as time progressed, her senses started to kick in. Derron wasn't on shit. He was just pacifying her. Same shit, different day. Nothing about them was going to change. She just knew eventually he'd get tired of her ass and drop her for a new bitch: Lacey. Now, she realized she was being weak and pathetic over a nigga. And she never thought in a thousand years that she'd be the type of a vulnerable and gullible woman who would let a dude brutalize her and then try to make up to her with dick and cash.

She was subjecting herself to mental and physical torture and they weren't even an official item yet. She just pretty much assumed they were. And that was based on his seemingly false promise. After whooping her ass, he pledged he was going to do right by her. Make her number one. But now all of that seemed like a lie given the way he seemed to be interacting with Lacey. She didn't believe he was going to make good on his promise at all. So now she was going to pull a stunt to show his ass that he needed to care.

She took the knife and dug them into her wrists. "AHHH!" she moaned as her crimson blood flowed from her arms. "You're gonna love me, Derron. You're gonna love me…" Within seconds, lightheadedness over took her body. Everything around her began to spin. Her breathing now shallow. Then, she slumped to the bathroom floor and continued to bleed out. She closed her eyes whispering, "You're gonna love me…"

Chapter Fourteen

"**Damn! Bitch! Don't you hear me fuckin' callin' you?!? WAKE THE FUCK UP!?!?"** Derron growled.

Erica's eyes shot wide open, instantly snapping out of a daze. Derron hovered her as she sat at the receptionist' desk in the gym's lounge. She looked up at Derron with A panicky gaze. "Sorry, the pain meds are kicking in. I'm kind of tired," she muttered through her still tender mouth. She had hallucinated killing herself after sucking Derron off in his office. They hadn't even fucked yet today.

Derron threw his hands up in the air out of frustration. "Well, why didn't you say something fucking earlier?!? Man, you can't be falling asleep on the job like this! Fuck wrong with you, girl?!?" he growled through a contained whisper. He obviously didn't want to make that much of a scene. Although it was the mid-afternoon and the gym was pretty scant with clients, Derron still didn't want to lose his cool in front of clients and other employees.

Erica stared at Derron in silence. *What was wrong with me?!? Nigga, you damn near broke my fuckin' jaw! That's what wrong!* That was what she thought and wanted to scream aloud. But shit, her ass knew the fuck better. She knew if she retorted with that slick ass statement Derron wouldn't be afraid to unleash the monster on her again. And that she definitely didn't want.

"I'm…I'm just in some pain, Derron. That's all…," she mumbled with a lowered head. "I'll just go get some coffee, okay?"

"Yeah, come on, bruh. Go tell Terry to make you one of them caramel macchiato shakes or somethin. Extra expresso. Shit! You know how I feel about the front desk. First impression is the best impression."

"I'm sorry."

"Don't be sorry. Get the fucking shake. Damn!" Derron stormed off.

Erica got up and made her way to the pro shop to get the smoothie Derron recommended. She came back from some moments later and drowned herself into listening to some old R&B from the 90s on Spotify while she looked over some spreadsheets on the computer.

Erica hadn't noticed, but an unfamiliar young chick had made her

way into the gym. She scanned around, looking lost. Then she made her way up to the receptionist' desk. She looked down at Erica and said, "Excuse me?"

Erica still had her gaze attached to the computer screen. Earphones were plugged into her ears so she didn't hear the young woman standing before her.

The young woman knocked on the countertop and said once again, "Umm…Excuse me?!?"

Erica finally noticed the girl and looked up and said, "Oh, Hi. I'm sorry. Wassup? You here for a class?"

"Ughh. No. I'm, ughh, I'm looking for Mr. Harrington. Can I please speak to him? Is he here today?"

Erica raised a brow. "Ughh, who exactly are you? Why do you need to speak to him?" she said with a slight attitude.

"Please, this is important! I really need to speak to him," the young woman replied with haste. The girl was short, stubby and dark-skinned with a small afro. Erica looked her up and down and quickly pondered if Derron was fucking this '*fat ass black bitch'*, too. Her internalized self-hatred was on full display.

"Again, who are you? I am not just about to call him and tell him some random is down here to see him. Besides, he's teaching a class right now," she lied. There weren't any classes going on around this time. Derron was probably upstairs in his office working on marketing or looking over his books.

"Look, please…My roommate, who used to work here. Adrianna. I'm sure you knew her."

"What about her?"

"Well, I'm Adrianna's roommate. She's been gone for nearly a month now. Nobody has seen her around. I just spoke to her parents recently and they haven't heard from her either. I was wondering if anyone else knew of her whereabouts."

Erica pursed her lips and her eyes turned into investigative slits. "Okay. Let me see if I can catch Derron. Give me a moment, okay?"

"Thank you."

"You can have a seat over there while I page him."

Dedra went over and sat down in a lobby couch. Erica got on the desk phone and dialed Derron's office extension.

~

Moments earlier…

"Yeah, keep lickin' that shit. Stick that tongue deep up in that booty hole, nigga! Get that shit super-wet. Yeah, you eatin' that shit! I'm ready for that dick now," Derron moaned with his tongue hung

out of his mouth. The nigga was damn near drooling, enraptured in the bliss of getting his ass ate the fuck out by none other than his own top trainer, Mr. Jake.

All that could be heard at the moment was the incessant sound of slurping. Both of the guys were oiled up and fully naked inside of the office. This, too, was a common routine for both of the guys. They were on the office floor. Derron was on his knees, his ass cheeks spread out. Jake had his face planted right smack dab in the middle of his boss's muscular, tight, freshly waxed ass.

"You ready for that dick, huh?" Jake seductively inquired as he pulled his face out from between Derron's cheeks and wiped his mouth. "Man, I love the way you taste."

Ring. Ring. Ring.

The sound of Derron's office phone ringing instantly caught both DL niggas off guard. "Fuck!" Derron growled as he proceeded to get off the ground and make his way over to his desk. "I told this stupid ass bitch to never call me when I'm in a fucking meeting!"

"I don't know why you keep dealing with her ass. Or any of these other bitches for that matter…"

"Yeah, whatever. She just my lil do bitch. I'm finne drop her ass once those bruises and shit go away."

The phone continued to ring.

"Nigga, you crazy," Jake replied with a smile on his face. "We need to talk about that anyways," he said as he proceeded to put his clothes back on. "Anyways, I'll see you later. Ms. Gaetz is coming soon and you already know how that old white bitch is."

"Yeah," Derron replied and then glanced down at the phone. He picked the phone. "Yo, I thought I told you not to call me when I'm in a fucking meeting?!? This shit better be fucking important."

"I'm sorry, Derron," Erica apologized. "This girl, she claims to be Adrianna's roommate. She said she needs to talk to you ASAP."

"Why? I ain't got shit else to do with Adrianna," Derron roared as he rubbed his oily, hard chest.

Jake looked over at him and rolled his eyes as he continued putting his clothes back on.

"She said she's missing…Haven't heard from her in a month," Erica whispered.

"Missing…Fuck you mean by missing?"

"She said she hadn't heard from her in nearly a month…She wanted to know if anyone seen her."

Derron stood there for a moment, his body tight and nervous. "Ughh, okay. I, umm, Hrrrm. Tell her ass I'll be down there in a minute."

"Okay," Erica replied.

"Thanks."

"Derron," Erica quickly said, not wanting him to hang up on her immediately.

"What?"

"I'm sorry about earlier. I didn't mean to—"

"It's okay. Sorry I went off on you. I'm just kind of nervous right now." Derron looked away for a second and didn't want Jake to hear what he was about to say. "I'm about to get audited by the IRS…"

"Damn…," Erica replied. "I'm sorry to hear that. You need me to do anything to help?"

"I got it. Don't worry. I appreciate everything. I'll be down there…"

"Okay."

The two of them hung up.

"What's that about?" Jake asked as he made his way toward the office door.

"Adrianna apparently is missing."

Jake froze. "Oh, wow," he said. A flat expression came across his face. "So, what you gonna do?"

"Man, I don't fucking know! Man, just leave! Go train Ms. Gaetz! I don't know why the fuck you all up in my shit anyways!"

"Are you fucking serious right now, love?!?"

"*Love*?" Instantly hearing that word triggered Derron. Despite still being naked, he lunged at Jake and shoved him against the wall. "Nigga, what the fuck did you call me?"

"I said…*love*," Jake replied, looking completely caught off guard. He didn't anticipate Derron's vicious visceral reaction. Truth be told, the pair had been fucking for quite some time. In fact, Jake and Derron had an intense, down-low relationship for nearly four years now. Lately Jake had been deep in his feelings for Derron and was getting to the point where he truly wanted to be in a full-on relationship with Derron. Derron expressed the possibility but hadn't given the greenlight for them to make it *official*.

"Man, don't you ever say that shit ever again!"

"But Derron!"

"NIGGA! JUST LEAVE!"

Jake scanned him up and down. "FUCK YOU, BRUH!" he shouted and then stormed out of the office, slamming the door behind him.

Derron was still standing there naked, hands on his waist, head shaking in disgust. "Fuck nigga gon say he loves me. He taking shit way too seriously." Agitated and ready to explode, Derron quickly threw his outfit back on and the made his way downstairs to go see what Adrianna's roommate was talking about.

"Yo, what's going on?" Derron's voice boomed in the empty lobby of the gym. Erica, looked over Dedra and said, “Hey, excuse me, miss. Mr. Harrington is here.” She then looked straight at Derron and produced a smile he made his way closer and closer to her.

Derron got to the desk and then looked around in confusion. Erica then pointed at Dedra as she got up from the couch and strolled over to them.

“Hi, Mr. Harrington. I’m Dedra. Adrianna’s roommate.”

"Hey. Wassup. What’s going on with Adrianna?”

Dedra took a deep breath and then said, "I haven't seen or heard from her in weeks and I am getting concerned something bad possibly may have happened to her. Do you know where she could be? We split rent for an apartment and it's coming due soon."

"Wow."

"I know. I’m just so scared. I don’t know what I’m gonna do. I tried to—"

“Are you fucking serious right now?” Derron said, interrupting the roommate.

“What’s wrong?”

"I said *wow* because the girl is missing and the last thing you are worried about is your rent?" Derron smacked his teeth and shoved the girl with his shoulders out of his way as he swooped around the receptionist' counter and looked down at a massive calendar adjacent to Erika.

"I didn't mean it like that. Her parents are also looking for her as well!"

"Well, why didn't they call the police or file a missing person's report?"

Dedra shrugged her shoulders. "Sometimes Adrianna has a tendency to be a free spirit. She’ll just take off and won’t come back for days. She's done something like this before."

"Really? She’s never done that to me when she worked here," Derron said raising a brow of suspicion. “So, she just disappears and doesn’t tell a soul?”

"Yeah..."

"Well, if that’s the case, why not just wait it out and see what happens?"

"Well, I'm coming to you because I know you two have been kind of close. I remember you coming by the apartment a few times."

Erica’s mouth dropped and her eyes instantly transformed into venomous slits.

"Excuse me?" Derron's tone suddenly grew serious and deep. "What

did you say? You saw who?"

"I remember you coming by a few times and spending the night. I mean, I think that was you. I work nightshifts at a bar and sometimes I'm a tad tipsy afterwards, so I could be mistaken."

"Yeah, I think you're mistaken. Do you plan on taking a class?"

"No."

"Well, then, this conversation is over. And only paying clients are allowed in my establishment. See your way through my door and don't come back unless you wanna lose that beer gut."

"WOOOOW! You are such a fucking prick! No wonder Adrianna was going to quit this shithole anyways!" Dedra quickly spun on her heels and marched out of the gym.

"Fat ass, black ass, Esther Rolle lookin' ass bitch! GET THE FUCK OUT MY SHIT! Need to get a fucking perm, fat ass gorilla hoe!" Derron groaned smacking teeth and rolling his shady eyes. He knew he was lying like a muhfucka, but he had to play it off in front of his sweet, stupid side pussy, Erica.

"Really, Derron?"

"Yeah, really. I meant every fuckin' word too. Fuck her. Coming up into my shit asking me questions about a bitch I fired weeks ago."

Erica by this point heard enough. Even with her body still somewhat in pain, she was ready to confront Derron head on. *Fuck it!* she thought. If they were gonna fight, she was ready to put her all in this time, even if it meant she'd die in the process. Besides, she actually did have a knife resting in her back pocket. If the nigga tried to come at her again, she was going to pull it out and shank his ass in his liver or neck.

"Nah, I said really because I know you're fucking lying! So, tell me, when did you start fucking Adrianna?"

"Huh?" Derron tried to play stupid. "What the fuck are you talking about?"

"You think I'm stupid, Derron?"

Derron looked at Erica, almost ready to explode, but he couldn't muster up a response. He knew he was caught red-handed. So, he didn't respond. He just shuffled through a massive desk calendar and acted as if she was just talking crazy. But, of course, she wasn't talking crazy. Erica was seething. "So you aren't gonna respond?" she asked, tapping a ballpoint pen against the desk, her other hand planted on her face. With her eyes unblinking and staring intensely at Derron, she wanted this piece of shit to fess up right then and there so she could easily make her next move.

"Ok, so we fucked a few times. Pussy was disgusting...But that was the past. Let's just move on, okay?"

Erica's mouth dropped as she didn't anticipate that response. *Oh,*

this nigga for sure lost his fucking mind, but Ericka knew she had to keep it cool, calm and collect. She looked up at him and said, “I guess it is what is then.”

Suddenly Derron changed his disposition and smiled. "She’s history, okay? You are number one. I promise,” he lied.

“I understand. Sorry, I just…That just caught me off guard.”

“Understood.”

“Anyways, are we still going out tonight?”

“Actually….Something came up. I forgot to tell you. Sorry,” Derron apologized.

Erica exhaled and lowered her head. “I understand. Investor meeting?”

“Yeah…”

“No worries. I’ll just see you when you get back to the house then. I might make something for you to eat. Is that cool?”

“Sure thing,” Derron said. He took a quick glance at her for a second and then leaned down and kissed her on her forehead. “Look, I’m gonna straighten all of this shit out. And I promise I’m not fucking anymore people. Adrianna was just a one-off fling here and there. And besides, you and I weren’t that serious up until recently.”

“Derron, I understand. I just…” Erica paused for a moment. “Look, just go handle your business. I got you, okay?”

“Thanks,” Derron replied and then made his way back to his office. He had an important call to make…Adrianna was on his mind, and not in a good way.

Chapter Fifteen

"Okay! Look, girl, once we get done eating, we're gonna bounce down to Michigan Avenue and see if we can get the right fit for tonight! I am just so glad buddy finally got the balls to ask you out!" Alexandria said laughing.

"Right?!? Damn, I mean, it only took him forever," Lacey replied as the two devoured naan bread covered in some overpowering Indian spice and butter.

Lacey and Alexandria were dining at a hole-in-the-wall Indian restaurant in Lincoln Park on Chicago's North Side. This was the first time ever Lacey had been to an Indian restaurant. She was a bit skeptical at first. Mainly because she never found the aroma of Indian food to be seducing. But she also didn't want to down a huge meal before her big date with Derron and end up having the bubble guts. Alexandria insisted they go though, just to break the monotony. 'Ain't nothin' wrong with trying something different', Lexy said when they pulled into the parking lot of the restaurant.

"Oh, before I forget! Girl, I got something else to tell you, too," Alexandria said taking a bite of the bread. She took a sip of water and then asked, "So, you remember the trainer guy, Jake?"

"Yeah! Of course! Hell, I see him almost every day. Jake is cool as hell!"

Alexandria looked away and rolled her eyes. She smacked her teeth and took a sip from her glass of lemon water again. "Girl, he's gay as hell," she grumbled.

"WHAT?!?" Lacey exclaimed, dropping a fork in her hand. "How in the hell do you know that?"

"Girl, so the other night, he invited me over, right? So, we're in his living room, chilling, watching TV. We're talking about random life stuff. Politics. Religion. Serious shit. Anyways, he gets up to go to the bathroom. But he left his phone on his coffee table."

Lacey lowered her head and shook it in disbelief. She already knew what the fuck Alexandria was about to say. Homegirl was a super-sleuth. "Girl, please don't tell me you went through that man's phone?"

"Girl! Hell fucking yeah!"

"LEXY!"

“WHAT?!? Girl, please! You already know you need to do your due diligence on these clown ass niggas! Shit, a bitch ain’t finne be caught messed up in these streets fooling around with these weirdos or lying ass niggas!”

“Girl, you really went through the man’s phone?!?! I can’t believe you!”

Alexandria shrugged her shoulders and said, “Girl, whatever. Look, like I said, shit, I ain’t tryna get caught up in another nigga’s mess. You already know how I roll. My first concern, of course, was trying to figure out if this nigga had a wife or a girlfriend. Or even kids. But, bitch, when I picked up his phone, I saw he had Grindr installed on his phone. And he just got a message from some old ass white man wanting to blow his old ass out! And, ughh, you know them nasty, old ass white men like having gerbils and fists up their asses!”

Lacey gasped. “AHHH! OKAY, OKAY! ENOUGH! Nasty! You just ruined my entire appetite!” Lacey roared and quickly covered her ears.

“Girl, my appetite was ruined from the moment I saw that message!” Alexandria replied and rolled her eyes again. The two friends burst out into laughter. “I wonder if Derron knows he’s gay?” Lacey asked.

“Girl, who knows. Jake, though, he does have a big ass dick,” Alexandria confessed shaking her head in shame. “Such a waste of a nice, ole, big, pretty penis…”

“Wait, girl, I’m confused?” Lacey said with a scrunched face. “You still had sex with him?!?”

“Nah, girl! I made that nigga jack off in front of me.”

Lacey clasped her mouth. “Girl, noooo! You are so…WEIRD! What the fuck is wrong with you?!?”

A white couple seated not too far away from Alexandria and Lacey looked over at the two. The white girl had this look of disgust on her face and when Alexandria looked over, the white girl quickly turned away. But Alexandria quickly noticed the scowl, rolled her eyes and then grumbled to Lacey, "Girllllll. I swear! These white folk ‘round here swear they run every damn thing! Look. The couple over there look mad 'cuz I'm loud and whatnot. My dollar is just as good as theirs. The fuck is their problem?!?"

Lacey didn’t want to make it obvious the two were talking about the couple. She quickly glanced out the corner of her eye and saw the white girl. She swiftly looked back at over at Alexandria. "Girl, don't even trip about it. You know we in their part of town," she said.

"Nah, fuck that. This is my part of town, too. I should go over there and say something to that manly looking bitch."

"Girl, calm down! You can't be saying nasty, sexual, foul shit like

that out in public anyways! Especially about gay people. You know we in that part of town, too," Lacey responded as she tore off another piece of seasoned bread sitting before her. She dipped it in some flavorful white yogurt sauce and then stuffed it in her mouth. "This is good...Kind of has a spice. Girl, I hope this food don't mess my stomach up!"

"Oh, I'mma calm down alright," Alexandria responded and took a sip from her water again. "Where is that waitress at anyways? It's starting to get late!" Lexy looked around for their waitress. She saw the young woman from afar and signaled for her to come over. Before the waitress came over though, she stopped at the table of the white couple and then made her way over to Alexandria and Lacey. "Hey there...," she announced to get their attention. She produced a somewhat nervous and smile and asked, "Can you all please keep it down a tad? The other couple across from you all complained that you all are a bit loud."

"Oh!" Alexandria quickly responded with her eyes widened. "Really? We're being loud?!?"

"Sorry," the waitress mumbled. "I can go ahead and take your order though. The couple will be leaving soon—"

Alexandria threw her hand up in the waitress' face and interrupted by saying, "You know what...Don't worry about it." She pulled out some cash from her purse and threw it on the table. "Here's $10 for the nasty, dry ass bread and the water. Oh, and I should report this place to the health inspector, too. Your hair got in my water, boo." Alexandria stood up and then looked at Lacey. Lacey was floored bestie was pulling this mess in the middle of the restaurant. But hey, that was her friend and she supported her in her sudden decision. Besides, she was a bit iffy about the restaurant anyways.

"Oh, I'm so sorry, ma'am, I can—"

"Nah, I'm good, homegirl. Put that hair in a net by the way. Let's go, Lacey..."

Lacey, not saying a word, followed suit.

The two women began to march through the relatively empty restaurant and passed the couple. The white guy was taking a sip of something out of glass and looked the other way. The white girl followed his lead and gazed off, pretending as if she was admiring a picture. As Alexandria passed the white girl, she looked over her shoulder for a few seconds and said with such visceral intensity, "Bitch..."

Alexandria and Lacey exited the restaurant, hailed for a cab and headed Downtown to Nordstrom's on Michigan Avenue.

~

"Wow...That was weird," Kelsey, the white boy sitting at the table, commented once he noticed Alexandria and Lacey were no longer inside of the restaurant. "Okay, so what were you saying now?"

Seated across from him was none other than Jenn...

"Derron got me pregnant," she confessed.

"Wait. What?!? I'm sorry, I was kind of blanking out before, but you said what now? Derron got you pregnant?!??!? You all are in a relationship???!?!?"

Jennifer exhaled and her shoulders slumped as she glanced down at her plate. "Yes...he fucking got me pregnant and now he wants to deny it's his...So, that's why I'm coming to you. I hate to do this, Kelsey, but…I have something for you and Derron…" Jenn slid him a letter and immediately got up from the table. "I gotta run, but I guess we'll be chatting soon."

Kelsey was Derron's business partner. He co-owned and managed the martial arts studio with Derron. Kelsey managed most of the day-to-day affairs of the studio though while Derron mainly managed BeastCORE. Kelsey looked down at the letter and opened it. It was from a law firm: Flick & Gaines. As Kelsey devoured the content of the letter, his white face turned read. "I'm gonna fucking kill his ass!" he roared and pounded his fists on the table.

~

"Girl! Yo ass is gonna wow the fuck out of this man! Oh yeah, you finne definitely give him some of that kitty cat tonight!" Alexandria laughed, sticking her tongue out as she watched Lacey emerge from the dressing room.

The two friends were now inside of a Nordstrom's, shopping for an outfit for Lacey to wear tonight.

Although she and Derron were going to a concert, Lacey didn't want to wear any ole outfit. The crowd at the Bad Boy Reunion was obviously going to be much older. People attending this concert were probably the parents or older aunts and uncles of the Chief Keef audience. That meant most of the people attending were probably going to be dressed reasonably. Not too urban, but then not too gaudy either as if they were going to get their souls set, saved and delivered at a T.D. Jakes revival.

Lacey would've just rolled with some jeans, her favorite pumps and a matching jacket, but of course, she had to consult bestie. And you already know bestie was downing her idea. After spending about a solid two hours in the mall, Alexandria now had her row dog looking like she was ready to capture the heart of an Arab billionaire prince from Dubai or some shit. To hell with jeans and some pumps, Lacey

was decked out in a leather bodysuit with matching stilettos. The entire outfit gripped the fuck out of Lacey's now tight, well-conditioned body – thanks all to Mr. Derron himself. Even Alexandria had to comment on her bestie's progress and she was even thinking of going back to BeastCORE herself to get into shape.

"So, you don't think is too much?" Lacey asked. "I don't know. I look like..."

"Look like what?"

"I mean, my breasts are all out! And my ass! Like, I don't know. This seems a bit hookerish."

Alexandria smacked her teeth and replied by saying, "Girl, stop overthinking! This is what's in now! You letting Marshall's and TJMaxx fuck with your standards! And then do you know how many thirsty ass women are gonna be at this concert tonight?!? Thirsty ass, old bitches at that?!? Remember, girl, men want EYE candy. Nah, fuck that, men want EYE dessert."

Lacey laughed and shook her head. "For a girl to be from the Northside, you sure do say some Southside-79th and Cottage Grove shit..."

Alexandria smacked her teeth playfully. "What?!? Them fast ass heffas. Don't you ever compare me to one of them lil THOTs. Besides, it can be rough up north, too. I got a lil hood in me."

"Girl..."

"Anyways, look, the outfit is perfect, Lacey," Alexandria said quickly changing her tone back into her familiar, bourgeois voice. "You need to let go, Lacey. I mean, look at you!" Alexandria walked up to Lacey and turned her shoulders in the direction of the dressing room mirror. "Girl, you lost about a good fifteen pounds. Your arms are chiseled. Your waist is small. And girl, those squats he got you doing definitely got your ass looking right!" Alexandria smacked Lacey's ass and laughed.

"Girl! What's wrong with you?!?!"

"Oh, hush. I'm just playing. We're getting that outfit though!"

Lacey stared at herself in the mirror for a moment. Alexandria was right. She needed to be proud of her new body. Granted, she didn't need to lose THAT much weight, but the fifteen pound weight loss was enough of a change to make her look a lot more modelesque. She was back down to her high school weight. The more she stared at herself the more she realized she truly did look younger. "Yeah, you're right. Let me get this so we can bounce. I still gotta see if I can get something done to my hair."

"RIGHT! Now let's get back to Sephora ASAP!"

~

“So, definitely give me a call to tell me how everything went, okay!” Alexandria said to Lacey as the two made their way out of Nordstrom’s. Despite having a bunch of shopping bags in her hand, Lacey went in to give Lacey a hug. “Girl, you mean so much to me. I know I don’t say it often, but you truly are my best friend. I don’t know what I would do without you!”

“Girl, STAHP IT! You’re gonna make me cry!”

“No, but for real though, Lexy. Shit, you ain’t just my friend! You are my sister! You always come through for me.”

“Lacey!” Alexandria suddenly felt overwhelmed with the emotion. She fanned her face with her hand and wiped away a tear coming out from the corner of her eye. “You’re my sister, too!”

The two besties embraced and then departed from the store. Lacey made her way to her Lyft driver who was already outside the store in his gray Honda. Lexy was going to continue to go shopping. Lacey took off, ready to commence the beginning of what she just knew was going to be a spectacular night.

Chapter Sixteen

Derron was sitting quietly inside of his office, looking over some expense reports with the seriousness of a stroke. “Something’s off. This ain’t right,” he groaned. The books were coming up short by a couple of thousand. By now it was late afternoon and he was ready to wind down for the day. But seeing this shit was pissing him off. His date with Lacey was right around the corner and needed to head out ASAP to get ready and pick her up.

Knock! Knock!

Derron looked up at his office door at the sound of the two, hard knocks.

“Who is it?!?” Derron screamed. If it was Erica, he was about to curse her the fuck out. He had just told her an hour earlier that he was about to step into a conference call and he wanted absolutely ZERO distractions.

“It’s Kelsey, bro! We need to talk!"

Derron’s eyes widened in suspicion. Kelsey was the last person he expected to be knocking at his office door. The two saw each other all of maybe once or twice a month. He glanced down at his phone and didn’t see he had missed any calls. “Be right there,” Derron uttered as he quickly made his way over to his office door. He opened it and was immediately hit with Jake standing there asking, "So….When were you going to tell me?"

"Tell you about what?" Derron replied with a raised brow.

"Jenn…She’s pregnant. What the fuck is going on?"

Derron paused and tightened his lips. He was totally caught off guard. He swore Kelsey probably came to discuss those missing numbers on the spreadsheet, not his secret, fucked-up relationship with Jenn.

"What are you talking about?"

“Don’t fuck with me, man. What the fuck is really going on, dude?” Kelsey groaned, tapping his right foot against the floor. His arms were tightly folded as he continued to stare hard at Derron wanting the immediate truth.

“Man, come in. I don’t want nobody to hear this!” Derron let

Kelsey into the office and quickly shut the door.

Derron then sauntered back over to his desk, sat down and shuffled through some papers on his desk. “Look, man, I got a lot going on right now. What are you talking about?”

"Come on, bro. Don't bullshit me. I just came back from lunch with Jenn not too long ago. You got her fucking pregnant, you fucking idiot?!?!? You were fucking her behind my back?!?! It explains it all! So, this is the EXACT reason why she's no working for us!"

Derron lowered and shook his head, pretending as if he cared. "Well, look, man, it's not what you think it is."

"Then, what is it? I mean, dude, she's talking about suing us...For $1 million. You got $1 million in the bank, asshole?"

"Wait, what?"

"Yeah! After paying for that slut’s lunch, look at what she fucking handed to me. READ IT, FUCKER!” Kelsey threw the letter from the law firm at Derron, but it fell on the office floor before Derron could catch it.

Now Derron was pissed and would've easily thrown a punch or two at Kelsey's face. But Kelsey was really like a brother to him and respected him enough to not outright disrespect him. Besides, Kelsey's father was a major financier in their businesses, mainly BeastCORE. The last thing he wanted to do was get on his bad side. Derron was looking to expand his brand out to the East Coast in a few months and the last thing he wanted was to fuck over his personal and financial relationship with Kelsey.

Derron leaned down in his seat, picked the letter up off the ground and quickly perused its contents. Kelsey wasn't making not a single thing up. Jenn was threatening litigation against Derron and Kelsey in the amount of $1 million. And unless they were willing to settle immediately for a negotiated amount, the attorneys stated they were willing to go straight to trial.

Derron took a deep breath, closed his eyes and then screamed. "Man, I swear to God I should've never looked twice at that raggedy ass white bitch!"

"Really, dude? Grow the fuck up, man!" Kelsey screamed. He stood up and got into Derron’s face. “I should fucking FUCK you up right now, man!”

"Sorry, Kel! I was gonna tell you but—"

“BUT THE FUCK WHAT?!?!”

Derron collapsed into silence as he slowly crumbled the letter up in his hand.

“Look, dude, I’ll handle it. Just calm down, Kelsey. Shit, you scaring me!”

“YOU’RE DAMN RIGHT I’M SCARING YOU! Handle your shit, bro!

I've put a lot of trust in you. This right here though… This...I don't know. I feel like you just shitted on our entire friendship over fucking pussy, bro. Like, why the fuck didn't you just come to me?!?!"

"Because! I didn't Jenn and I would go that far!"

"Right! And you got her fucking pregnant! And she wants to keep this child! So after she sues us, she's gonna go after you hardcore and put you on child support! How the fuck are you gonna do that if the gym collapses??!?"

"Listen, Kelsey, I'm gonna sort this out. Look, I apologize for not telling you, I just didn't want to further complicate things around here."

"Derron! I don't give a fuck about who you decide to stick your dick in. We go all the way back to Iraq. 2003, bro. We fucking survived roadside bombs. You think I give a flying fuck about some ditzy slut?!?"

Derron laughed.

"This isn't FUCKING funny, man! EVERYTHING WE WORKED FOR IS ON THE LINE. FIX THIS SHIT! Make this shit go away...Or else," Kelsey said with pursed lips. That look meant that he was going to pull the plug on their friendship and business relationship, something at this point Derron simply couldn't afford.

"Okay, man, I got it. I'll simmer her ass down. She's just fucking with us. She just wants me to be in a relationship with her. But I can't..."

"Why the fuck not?!?"

"Because I'm in one right now..."

"Fuck that! Bro, look, you need to go make that shit work with Jenn and get rid of that other woman, whoever the fuck she is! STOP LETTING THESE FUCKING BITCHES RUIN EVERYTHING FOR YOU MAN! You've always had this fuckin' weakness!"

"Kelsey, bro, calm down. I got it!"

"Don't tell me to calm the fuck down! You need to calm your dick down! Now get the fuck up and call that bitch and fix this shit IMMEDIATELY!"

"AHHH!" Derron screamed. "Where the fuck is she even working at now?!?"

"Macy’s on Michigan Ave!!!"

"Okay, dude! Shit! Give me a break!"

"Give you a break?!? You know what..You got some fuckin' nerve man. Just handle your shit and then we'll handle our shit later...Capeesh?"

"Fine."

Derron reached his hand out, wanting to dap up. He presumed his white veteran would take in his apology and the dap would certify

they were still on good terms.

"Man, whatever," Kelsey groaned smacking his teeth as he looked him up and down. He shook his head in disgust and walked out of the office.

Derron sat back down, quickly pulled out his cell phone and dialed Jenn. Her phone kept ringing and ringing until finally she answered. “So, now you wanna talk?”

“Where are you?”

“Work.”

“Macy’s?”

“How’d you know?”

“I’ll be there ASAP.”

“Derron, I get off work in an hour!”

“I’ll be there in ten.” Derron hung up and then threw his phone on the desk. His PTSD was beginning to kick in as he scrambled his office, looking to get his shit together. Then it dawned upon him…he needed to go ahead and reschedule the date with Lacey, unfortunately. And possibly even put a pause on his mission to secure her puss. “FUCKING BULLSHIT!” he growled and kicked his desk before he finally made his way out. On his way to Macy’s, he called Lacey and told her a family emergency came up.

~

“Where the fuck she at?!?!?” Derron grumbled as his eyes darted around the crowded department store. Ninety-percent of the women currently inside the Macy’s were similar-looking white bitches like Jenn. Even with having his face and dick all up in the white woman’s ass and pink pussy, the man still couldn’t tell the difference between his Jenn and the random Jenns littering the crowded Macy’s at the moment.

Derron paced the woman’s floor and then made his way to the men’s section on another floor. Within seconds, he saw Jenn ringing up a customer. Derron didn’t hesitate in running up to the counter.

“Let’s go!” he said and grabbed her.

“Umm! What are you doing?!?” she said, looking down at his hand gripping her left arm.

“Stop with the BS. We need to talk! NOW!”

“Good!”

Jenn looked over at her co-worker. “Mary, I’ll be right back!” Jenn then looked down at Derron’s grip again and said, “Let me the fuck go, you fucktard!”

Derron listened. “Just take us somewhere private.”

Jenn smiled. “The dressing room it is! Follow me!”

“This isn’t fucking funny, Jenn,” Derron whispered as he trailed her.

“Who said it was, asshole?”

The pair meandered to the men’s dressing room. The dressing room attendant, some fat, older Latina with gray hair gazed at Jenn. “He’s with me,” Jenn said. “He’s autistic. He’s my older brother,” she lied.

“Okay, chica!” the woman replied and let Jenn and Derron slide past her. Jenn found a room all the way down the aisle. Once inside, she shoved Derron to a wall and began to plant kisses all over him.

“What are you doing?!?!? This is for real, Jenn! Are you crazy?!?” Derron whispered.

“Shut up and fuck me!” she continued licking the man’s face and neck, grinding on him, ready to cum all over his dick.

“So this is what this shit is about?!? All over fucking dick?!?”

“Yup! I’ll make all of this shit go away if you promise two things…”

“What’s that?”

Jenn pulled out a piece of paper from her back pocket and opened it. She pulled out a black ink pen from her hair. She handed him the paper and the pen. “I’ll get rid of this fucking baby if you sign this paper stating you’ll have a sexual relationship with me for the next year or so. You will fuck me at least twice a week. Oh, and you’ll pay me $25,000 in damages. Emotional stress and lost wages.” she said.

Derron looked at the paper and asked, “Why just $25,000?!?”

“Because that’s how much I need the moment to get my Bikram yoga cert. I’m moving to Thailand in a year.”

“White girls…” Derron laughed. “Un-fucking-believable…”

“Well, believe it! Now sign this!”

Derron quickly scanned the contract again, not even realizing what he was truly putting his signature on. The terms were pretty simple and laid out, but Derron still didn’t pay attention to every single detail. Once he felt comfortable, he quickly signed the piece of paper and then handed it back to Jenn. She folded it and put it back into her back pocket. “Now come fuck this white pussy and you won’t be broke and homeless,” she moaned and returned to kissing all over Derron.

Derron succumbed. Nigga had to do what he had to do. He grabbed her, shoved her against another wall inside the dressing room and proceeded to suck her neck and face. Eventually, their clothes came off and for the next fifteen minutes, Derron pounded the fuck out of her white pussy until she had got her first set of orgasms.

Chapter Seventeen

Alexandria had this look of utter disgust on her face as she swiped through dress after dress. “Ughhh! Ewww, no, I would never wear something like this?!?! What the fuck were they thinking when they made this!” Alexandria commented aloud as she angrily perused a clothing rack inside of Macy’s.

Unlike Lacey, Alexandria was the type of chick who would and could spend an ungodly amount of time in the mall. Aside from serial dating, Lexy was an addicted retail shopper. Every day she just had to make it to some department store or another major retailer to buy something she probably didn’t need. But hey, she was balling like that, right?

The self-proclaimed, independent boss bitch continued to scan the rack, looking at a set of dresses she just thought were designed for none other than basic, frumpy bitches. “Okay, I’m ready to leave this place,” she said in an annoyed tone. Then she thought for a moment. *Wonder what type of men’s shirts they have on sale today?* She then scuttled her ‘bad’ self up to the men’s department.

Once she made her way up to the men’s level, she was instantly caught off guard

“WHAT THE FUCK?!?!”

She saw Derron –

AND the same nasty white bitch she and Lacey saw hours earlier at the Indian restaurant – ALL snuggled up on each other as they talked casually near the dressing room.

Lexy stood there for a moment, frozen. She didn’t know what to do or say. A million thoughts and emotions flooded her. She could see Jenn was just bumping her gums away as she stood next to Derron and some fat, old Latina woman. All types of laughs and giggles poured from Jenn’s mouth, and Derron seemed to be infatuated with her ass.

Alexandria’s eyes widened in fear and disgust as she gasped and clutched her mouth in shock. But then she quickly ran for cover behind a rack of suits. *What the fuck?!?!* was all she could keep thinking at the moment as red terror came over her yellow face.

“THAT FUCKING ASSHOLE’, she whispered but wanted to scream.

Alexandria raised her head for a bit to see if Derron and Jenn were still there, but by this point they had walked off, HOLDING HANDS.

Lexy stood up. Then she spun around and tried to follow the two from afar to see where they were headed to. Like a committed stalker, she trailed them from many feet away, occasionally ducking and hiding behind clothing racks and displays so she wouldn’t get caught.

Eventually, she saw the pair stop near the exit of the department store. “This nigga think he really fucking slick! I GOT HIS ASS! This fucking loser!” Lexy growled as she quickly pulled out her cell phone and pulled up her camera app. She pointed the phone in Jenn and Derron’s direction, zoomed in and began recording the pair. They turned and stared into each other’s eyes like they were on a fucking Soap Opera or some shit. Derron went in and hugged Jenn. Then they passionately kissed for about a minute. Jenn took one last peck from Derron on her thin ass lips before they split up. Derron exited the department store. Jenn made her way back in with the biggest grin spread across her pale face. Lexy observed every single instance, making sure that she was documenting the fuck out of this shady interaction. You would’ve sworN Lexy was a senior investigator for the show, *Cheaters*.

Jenn made her way closer and closer to Lexy, still enraptured in her Derron dick-induced bliss. But now Lexy had lost all limits and boundaries and was ready to confront this Becky head on. The moment Jenn got a foot away, Lexy popped out from behind a clothing rack and lunged at Jenn.

“EXCUSE ME?!?” Lexy announced. Jenn looked up and instantly gasped. “Oh My God! Lady, you followed me here! You’re crazy! I’m gonna call the police!”

“Who are you?!?!” Lexy asked.

“What do you mean who I am?!?! I am NOT telling you who I am! Now leave or I’m calling 9-11!” Jenn attempted to run off but before she could Lexy grabbed her arm and tugged her back. “Don’t run! Just tell me who you are why were you all up on Derron like that?!?!?”

Suddenly Jenn’s disposition of fear changed into a flat and empty expression. Her blue eyes grew wide in suspicion. “How do YOU know Derron?”

“He’s supposed to be going out with my friend tonight! I just saw you and him all up on each other! Are you two fucking each other?!?”

Jenn glanced Lexy up and down. “YES! I am! Because he’s MY boyfriend and he’s also the father of MY child! Who the fuck are YOU?!?”

“Boyfriend?!? Child?!?” Alexandria threw her gaze onto Jenn’s stomach. “You’re pregnant?!?”

"YES!"

"BY DERRON?!?"

"YES!"

"I don't believe this shit right now!" Alexandria screamed and stormed off.

~

The sound of dishes clinking inside of a kitchen condo overpowered the nonstop jokes and laughter pouring from an old rerun of Martin blaring from a living room TV. The smell of steak, onions, gravy and biscuits wafted in the kitchen's air. Alexandria was in the midst of preparing a nice, hearty meal.

Knock-Knock-Knock!

"Coming!" Alexandria yelled once she heard the loud, three knocks on her condo's front door. She quickly wiped her hands with a dishrag and dashed toward the front door. She looked out the peephole. A scowl came across her face and then it transformed into a fake, beaming smile. She opened the door.

It was Derron…

"Sup, sweetheart…," Derron said as he flashed a grin and then looked around, sniffing his nose. The smell coming from the kitchen made its way to the door, filling Derron's nostrils. "Damn, you up in there cookin' up a storm, it seems," he commented.

"Yeah. I wanted to try this new recipe I found off the YouTube channel," Alexandria said and then welcomed the man into her condo.

"So, what's up? What's the big surprise?"

"Oh, you'll see," Alexandria replied with a big ass fake smile on her face.

"Okay," Derron said and then made his way into the living room. The two stopped in the middle of the floor and then cuddled each other. Within seconds, they began kissing each other like two horny ass teenagers. Minutes after intense making out, both of them by now had their clothes completely off.

Dinner was already whipped up. The pots and pans on the stove were set to low, so Lexy had no worries her food would burn while Derron gave her a much-needed dick down.

After the two got done having sex, Derron took a shower and made his way back out to the living room and sat down. "Dinner almost ready?" he asked.

"Yup! I'm setting the table right now," Lexy said from the kitchen. She strolled her way into the living room with two plates of food in her hand. She sat them down on the table and then placed an envelope next to Derron's plate. She said, "It's ready now… I also got

the surprise for you on the table next to your plate."

Derron stood up and made his way over to the table. He sat down and looked at the unimpressive plate of steak, grilled onions, mash potatoes, brussel sprouts, and a dinner roll. He really wasn't hungry and definitely wasn't in the mood to eat someone's spotty cooking, especially coming from a *superficial, money-grubbing* bitch like Lexy. That was what Derron truthfully thought about the woman. "Damn, baby, this looks good. I hope it tastes good," he laughed as he forked through the food.

"You're not gonna read your surprise first?" Alexandria asked as she sat across from him.

"Yeah, I almost forgot," he said and then took the envelope from off the table and opened it. He pulled out a letter. It was a photocopy of the original letter from Jenn's law firm threatening litigation against him and Kelsey. His facial expression changed once he realized what he was reading. Lexy sat there quiet, anticipating his next move *Fuck nigga think he gon play me*, she thought, ready to read his ass. Then he pulled out another letter from the envelope. This letter read: "**READY TO GET EXPOSED, CLOWN ASS NIGGA???**"

"BITCH! YOU REALLY GOT ME FUCKED UP! ALL THE WAY FUCKED UP! YOU GOIN' THROUGH MY SHIT??!?! WHO THE FUCK YOU THINK YOU ARE?!?" Derron's sudden, violent growl matched his hard pound on the dining room table inside his condo. Dishware on the table clinked.

"YOU THINK YOU GON TRY TO EXPOSE ME, YOU RETARDED ASS BUM ASS BITCH?!?" The visibly angry boyfriend's diabolical tone echoed throughout the posh condo, instantly terrifying Alexandria.

Of course, Lexy was very much terrified and paranoid. Her entire 130-pound slender body jumped in her seat at the dining room table.

Petrified, Alexandria didn't anticipate this reaction. She thought she was going to catch him off guard and expose him for the liar she now knew he was. But suddenly that mindset changed. She was scared and didn't know what was going to happen next. She quivered as she threw a terrified gawk at Derron. She closely monitored his movement, awaiting what he was going to say or do next.

Derron didn't say anything though; he grew silent, taking deep breaths through his wide nostrils. His unblinking, hazel eyes devolved into oppressive slits and they glued to the woman's shuddering form.

Lethal silence entered the dining room. Laughs pouring from the *Martin* episode continued to blare from the flatscreen in condo's den.

Each second that passed felt like an hour to Lexy. She now could hear her own thoughts of dread. *Please, God, please don't let him hurt me, please don't let him hurt me*, she silently prayed, hoping her higher power would simmer down her boyfriend's rage. Her disquietude was

fueled with the uncertainty of Derron's next moves. Now that the cat was out the bag, she just simply wanted the truth. Nothing more, nothing less...Then she'd be able to move the fuck on from this psycho. However, had she known her prying would lead to Derron's sudden rage, she would've just left the accusation alone and kept life moving.

Derron's breathing was hard and rapid. His nose flared like a dragon as he continued to stare at her. He let out a small growl and uttered, "You really, really, really got some mothafuckin' nerve, you know that."

Alexandria sat at the table scared and unresponsive. Then she mustered up the courage to say something. "Did you fuck her? That's all I want to know, Derron...," she mumbled, tears trekked from the pockets of her eyes, swimming down her cheeks.

"IF I DID, IT AIN'T NONE OF YOUR FUCKIN' BUSINESS!" Derron howled, pounding on the table once more. Dishes clinked, this time louder.

Alexandria jumped at the thunderous sound and let out a slight wail. She gazed at Derron.

Derron continued to stare back at her with his eyes now widened.

"Well, if that's the case then, then what's the point of all of this? You lied to me...," she confessed, stammering her words.

Derron's eyes reverted to slits. And by his vicious look, it was more than obvious he wasn't feeling her words. Not at fucking all. He didn't say anything back to the woman. Silence overtook him again.

Tonight, Derron's look was different though. His stare was just… different. Was this a murderous gaze engineered into Derron's face? *Girl, please, run! RUN NOW! This nigga is going to kill you!* Alexandria's intuition sent her a stern warning, but the warning to flee was just too risky.

"Bitch! I didn't fucking lie to you! I always kept it a buck with you and now this is the shit you gonna pull on me?!?! Let me guess, that slutty ass so-called friend of yours told you she saw me."

"Derron, please, I just wanna know the truth. Please just tell me if you're still messing with her. That's all I want to know...But if this is the reaction you are going to give me, then I think I should just leave," she grumbled as she slowly lifted herself from her seat.

"Nah! FUCK THAT! Where the fuck you think you goin'?" Derron questioned, his tone very much still deep and thunderous, matching the pouring rain outside now.

As she shook her head, she responded by saying, "Out of here. Where else would I go? You said what you said, Derron. There's no need for us to continue this relationship...Goodbye."

"NO, BITCH! You ain't goin' NO FUCKING WHERE! Sit your ass the

fuck down and explain to me why you think you had the fuckin' right to go through my shit?!?"

The still-terrified woman was frozen in place as she took a deep inhale and then exhaled. "Because...," she said and took a deep breath and continued by saying, "I needed to know. I refuse to give myself to a man who thinks it's okay to lie about his past and current relationships. If I would've known you were still so enamored with this woman, I would've gotten what I needed out of you and left you two to carry on."

Nervousness still blanketed her facial expression but she had to say what she had to say if she was going to move on. Derron had his issues, and she was willing to help him through them, but she'd be damned if she was going to be a side bitch to another bitch.

Derron sat in his seat still silent, taking in what Alexandria just said. She was barely two inches off her seat when Derron stopped her. Frozen for a moment, she peered into his eyes and saw how menacingly serene he was.

Derron was still wordless. He tightened his face and gave her that 'look'. That look she once again registered as his seemingly murderous premeditation.

“Get what you needed from out of me?" Derron then asked with a furrowed face.

Finally, she was ready to make a cautious exit. She said, "Yes...And on that note, Derron, have a nice night and life."

"BITCH, I'MMA KILL YOU!" Derron screamed as he suddenly grabbed a full plate of food set before him off the table and lunged it at the woman. “AHHHHH!” she screeched to the top of her lungs, quickly ducking and avoiding the plate. With the way Derron through that plate, that shit could've cracked her skull wide open instantaneously, killing her.

Before Lexy could raise up and make a possible run for cover, Derron had already dashed out of his seat and yanked her down to the ground. He delivered a nonstop barrage of slaps to her face, and for a brief moment she blacked out.

"DON'T! YOU! EVER! GO! THROUGH! MY! SHIT! AGAIN! YOU UNDERSTAND ME, BITCH?!?" Derron growled at the top of his lungs. At each word in his command, he delivered a blow to Lexy’s face.

She was resigned and unresisting on the dining room floor but some natural and impulsive semblance of self-defense made her throw her arms up to mitigate the hard slaps.

“GOT ME ALL THE WAY FUCKED UP!” Derron roared. All of a sudden, he stopped his brutality. "I thought yo ass was different but it seems like you just like the rest of these stupid ass bitches!" Then, without hesitation, he threw his hands around her slender throat and

gripped her trachea, squeezing as hard as he could to cut off oxygen from her lungs.

He glanced up and saw a dinner plate on the table. He grabbed it and smashed the plate of steak and brussel sprouts into her face. “Wit-cho non-cookin' ass! Choke on this nasty shit you tried to feed me! GET THE FUCK UP!”

Luckily, smashing the plate on her face didn’t break her skull. Just a minor, inch-long gash ran across her forehead. Some blood appeared, but it mixed in with the brown steak gravy now covering her face.

Lexy attempted to get up and run away. But the nausea of anxiety mixed in with the beating suddenly made her weak, so she vomited all over the floor.

“GO TO THE FUCKING BATHROOM AND DO THAT SHIT!” Derron screamed, knocking her down to the ground despite her attempt to get up.

Without hesitation, he began dragging her down the hallway and into the bathroom. She screamed for help, but Derron quickly muzzled her crying pleas. He grabbed her off the floor and threw her into the bathroom and slammed the door shut.

Dizzy, weak and in pain, she managed to prop herself up off the ground and crawled over to the toilet. Shivering, she grabbed the lid of the toilet, lifted it up and instantly vomited in it. The vomiting came to a pause, but she could feel more contents from her stomach rise.

The woman sobbed as excruciating pain incarcerated her slender body; the same delicate and sensual body she’d often use to put her boyfriend in a state of bliss.

The door to the bathroom flew open.

“MAN, YOU KNOW WHAT! I’M JUST GONNA FUCKIN’ KILL YO ASS RIGHT FUCKIN’ NOW!” Derron screamed, holding a gun in his hand. He hocked it back and aimed it right at Alexandria.

“NO! Please! NO, DERRON! DON’T KILL ME, PLEASE!”

POW! POW!

Chapter Eighteen

"NO! Please! NO, DERRON! DON'T KILL ME, PLEASE!" Alexandria suddenly screamed. She tried to quickly cover her face and head, but of course, her hands weren't going to stop bullets from piercing her skull and instantly killing her. And if she survived, the woman would've definitely been declared brain dead.

POW! POW!

Derron let go two shots. But right above Alexandria's head. The two bullets went straight into the bathroom wall near the shower. "Hahahahah! Stupid ass bitch! Thought I was gonna really shoot your stupid ass?!?!? MAN, GET THE FUCK UP!" Derron screamed as he then lunged down at Alexandria and grabbed her off the floor. He dragged the terrified and unresisting woman out of the hallway bathroom and into the master bedroom of the condo.

Derron owned the entire condo building, which was located near the West Loop (West Downtown). This wasn't the townhouse in which lived along with Erica. This particular unit was occupied by Alexandria though. She 'bought' it from him nearly two years ago from his real estate development company. No one else lived in the building despite there being five other units, so the gunshots going through the wall wouldn't harm anyone other than a roach or mouse within the walls.

"Please! Baby! No! Please don't hit me no more! Please! I promise!" Alexandria cried. Her oozing blood, salty sweat, and long tears flowed down her battered face.

"SHUT THE FUCK UP!" Derron screamed as he suddenly cocked his fist back and didn't relent in punching her once again in the mouth. "NOW GET UP!" he screamed as he grabbed her off the bedroom's floor and threw her into the bed. With one hand gripped firmly around her neck and the other hand holding his gun, he leaned down and growled, "Now open yo mothafuckin' mouth, crack hoe bitch!"

Alexandria's bloodied and battered mouth was quivering as she slowly opened it. Derron slid the barrel of the gloc right into her mouth. "Now you feel that! Suck on that steel dick, bitch!" Alexandria

was afraid to close her mouth. Was he going to be for real this time and truly kill her? Blow her brains out all over the bed?

This was all truly her fault. *Should've never met fooled around with this crazy ass nigga three years ago*, she ruminated as she could see her life flash before her hazy, glassy eyes. She already knew once Derron killed her, everything about her life would come to light. All the shady shit. The drugs. The schemes. The fraudulent bank accounts. Her world of high-end finessing and luxury boutique manipulation would be exposed. The image of her being a successful, educated, paid black woman on her professional grind would collapse once details surrounding her murder were thoroughly investigated. Next thing you know, she was going to be all over local nightly news. Even in newspapers – possibly even on the front page. Everyone she knew – her family, associates, former spouses, former work colleagues, and most importantly, her BEST friend, Lacey – would soon discover that the woman they presumed was a focused businesswoman was not that. And hadn't been that in years at all. Why? Because homegirl gave up corporate America years ago to live the fast life of a drug-addicted prostitute and fraudster.

But then again…would people even know she was murdered? she wondered. And would Derron even get caught? See, Lexy knew Derron wasn't just going to kill her – nah – he was going to kill her AND then do an excellent ass job of ridding her body. Chop her up into a million pieces and feed her to some dogs. Or just take her remnants and dump them in the deep, choppy waters of Lake Michigan. Her existence would be wiped away in the twinkling of an eye. Derron and his people would tirelessly work to rid all details of her execution and even her shady dealings with him. No one would know why she just… disappeared.

"I SAID, SUCK IT, BITCH!" Derron screamed and pushed the barrel of the gloc deeper down her mouth, damn near touching the back of her throat. Her lips collapsed onto the gun and her mouth tightened. *Just do what he says girl, just do what he says…*

A crazy, satanic smile came over Derron's chiseled face. "Atta, girl! See…You like that, huh? Feel that metal dick glidin' up and down your tongue. Make that gun cum, bitch! HAHHHAH!" he laughingly roared. Crazy nigga then licked the side of Alexandria's pained face and then kissed her on her lips.

"Now, let me tell you two things that piss me the fuck off…Bitches with mouth, and bitches that don't know how to mind their own fucking business…Stick the fucking plan we had and you might just live. And I still might be able to break you off some fucking cash once everything goes through. Oh, and as far as Jenn, I already told you what the fucking deal was. I'll handle her ass. I told you I got a plan

for everything. Now, GET THE FUCK UP, clean yourself up and fix me something else to eat. That shit you made me was nasty as fuck. What the FUCK wrong witchu making me that bullshit anyway?!?"

"O-Oh-Okkk-kay," Alexandria muttered despite the gun still being lodged in her mouth. Had Derron shoved the gun any further, she just might choke to death on it. Nonstop tears escaped the corners of her pained, quivering eyes. She took a deep sigh of relief once she presumed Derron wasn't going to pull the trigger…again. *Thank you, Jesus. Thank, you, Jesus!* she silently prayed.

Derron pulled the gun out of Lexy's mouth and wiped her saliva and blood off the barrel with his shirt. "That white bitch also made me cancel the damn date with Lacey dealing with her dumb shit. So, I'mma call her back again and apologize. In the meantime, you still need to play dumb with your stupid ass friend. Capeesh?"

"Yess…," Alexandria fretfully replied as she crawled out of the bed holding her side.

Derron stood silent there for a few seconds, scanned her up and down and then walked away shaking his head in disgust. He slammed the bedroom door behind him. Alexandria then swiftly made her way into the bathroom so she could analyze the brutality that had been wrought onto her.

She stood there, looking intensely at herself in the mirror, taking in the aftermath of the nonstop punches, slaps, kicks, and jabs. Her left eye was somewhat swollen shut. Her mouth swollen, too. Spots of crusted and fresh blood painted her reddened face. She had rug burns and scrapes on her arms and legs from being dragged down the hallway.

She wanted to cry and scream so bad, but what was the point? This was the umpteenth time that Derron had unleashed his violence unto Alexandria, but this particular occasion was the worse of them all. She was able to take a slap or two here and there. Even a punch and kick. When she and Derron would get into drug-induced rages, the end result was always a severe ass beating. But Lexy was somewhat of a soldier and could handle a routine beating, so long as it wasn't to the point of her getting bludgeoned to death. This time though, this particular fight was a severe wake-up call. A stern red warning letting her know her murder was imminent if she kept fucking around with this lunatic. Sobriety began to set in as she stared hard at her fucked up face. She never imagined in a million years that she would end up in a violent, sadistic relationship with an undercover drug lord. All simply because a bitch wanted to be in a relationship with a *bad boy*.

Boom! The master bedroom's door crashed open, producing a thunderous sound that jolted Alexandria back into panic mode.

"Where you at?!?" Derron yelled. All of a sudden, the bathroom

door exploded open. Derron stood there, fists balled up. Lexy quaked at the sound of the master door crashing open. She gasped and then clutched herself into a corner of the bathroom. He looked at Alexandria and ogled at the extreme fright buried on her face.

"Bitch, stop it! You'll be alright…," he uttered. He pulled out a large sandwich bag filled with cocaine that was sealed with red tape. Smiling like a badass toddler, Derron dangled the bag of coke in his hand like a carrot and then threw it on the ground toward Alexandria. "There you go…Now, clean yourself up so we can finish what the fuck we got started!"

Lexy's eyes widened. Her disposition changed. Suddenly seeing the bag of coke made her forget the last hour. Without hesitation, she dropped to the floor, grabbed the bag of cocaine and then scurried back into a corner. You would've thought from Lexy's reaction that the fucking United Nations or the US Military had just airdropped bags of white rice over a remote village somewhere in the Ethiopian desert or some shit.

Derron shook his head as he observed Alexandria rip apart the red tape and open the bag like a starved manic. She dipped her face into the pure Colombian white powder and didn't hesitate in taking in rapid sniffs, one after another.

"See, hahahaha," Derron snickered. "I just knew that would make you fucking happy," Derron continued to laugh, shaking his head. He knew he had this coke fiend where she wanted.

Lexy kept sniffing away and Derron noticed she wasn't slowing down. AT ALL! "AY! Calm the fuck down! Shit! You might fucking overdose, stupid ass hoe!"

Alexandria didn't say a word. *Fuck that*! She just continued to take huge sniffs from the bag, hoping the rush of cocaine-induced ecstasy would mitigate the pain radiating all throughout her face, torso and limbs.

Derron, at this point, didn't care anymore if she did OD. Bitch was worthless anyways, he thought. He just needed her to stay cool and cordial with Lacey for the time being until he was able to get out of her what he wanted. He made his way back out of the bathroom to let his girlfriend enjoy the coke.

Once Alexandria got the extreme, pulsating blast from the coke she needed, she did as Derron instructed. Didn't want to fuck around anymore. She took a quick hot shower. Then, she attempted her best to clean up the bruises, scrapes, gashes, etc. She tried to put on some make up to conceal some of the bruises on her face. But, damn, that swollen left eye. That shit stood out from a mile away. Even Stevie Wonder could see it. It was so super-obvious even with washing her face and putting on makeup that something HORRIBLE had happened

to her. She thought about what else she could do to make herself look somewhat normal again, but she couldn't think of anything. But within moments, an idea came to her…She just hoped by now Derron had simmered down and would be open to her seemingly crazy yet rational suggestion. Once she finished putting on her outfit, she made her way into the condo's kitchen.

Derron was sitting at a dining room table, cautiously counting stacks of cash on a table. Lexy by now was happy and jumpy. You would've thought the two had just fucked. Truth be told, an intense fuck session was probably right around the corner once Derron got some coke and henny in his system.

"Do you just want me to order out something, babe?" she asked as she opened the fridge.

"Yeah…Just get a fucking pizza. Pepperoni and mushroom. And tell them to put the fucking pepperoni slices on top. I hate that raw ass shit. Crackas never fully cook their food. Who the fuck wanna eat some raw ass pepperoni?!? I want my shit burned!" he groaned as he counted stacks of cash from a black duffle bag. This nigga was completely out of his mind, complaining over how a pizza should be cooked rather than worrying about the fact that he was a sadistic monster who beat the shit out of women when he lost his cool. But bleh, that didn't deter him from the task at hand: counting today's cash flow. He was sitting at a dining room table, eyes glued to the millions of benjamins stacked before him.

"Okay," Alexandria replied.

She stood there for a moment and then thought for a second. Then she proceeded to say, "Derron, I think…Just hear me out though, but I think I should go to the hospital."

Derron glanced up at her with a scowl. "Yo, what the fuck are you talking about?"

"I…Well…If you still want me to talk to Lacey and whatnot, she's gonna ask questions. How am I gonna explain what just happened?!? She knows me in and out. She'll know when something is off."

Derron smacked his teeth. "Bitch…"

Lexy continued though. She wanted Derron to see the logic in her idea. "Look, I can always file a false police report…Say someone mugged me and tried to attack me, but I fought them off…"

"And where the fuck are you gonna tell the police all this happened?"

"I don't know…Maybe somewhere on the South Side?" Lexy shrugged her shoulders.

"Bitch, are you fucking retarded? Chicago Police Department got fuckin' cameras all over this bitch. Even in the hood. The moment you file a report and they go to checking cameras, if your story don't add

the fuck up, they're gonna investigate the fuck out of you. Damn… And I thought you were a college grad."

Alexandria stood there silent. "Okay," she then said and began to make her way back into the kitchen so she could call Giordano's Pizza and have Derron's dinner delivered.

Derron paused for a moment and thought more about what Alexandria just said. She was right. "You know what…On second thought. You're right. Fuck the pizza. We're going to the hospital. And bitch, you better not play any games with me. Got it?"

"Okay," Alexandria said sniffing her nose and twitching. That cocaine had her ass gone.

Chapter Nineteen

By now night fell and the rain outside seemed to come to a lull. Earlier, all the weathermen predicted that a heavy thunderstorm carrying torrential rain was to come into the area and drop nearly ten inches of rain in less than two hours. All the highways – 290, Lake Shore Drive, 55, the Dan Ryan – were victims of flash flooding.

By now though, the thunderstorm had made its pilgrimage from out of the city and the surrounding suburbs and was now traveling south into Indiana Not typical weather for a late Chicago September. But hey, in the Chi, like everything else, weather was extremely unpredictable. One day it was sunny. One day it was cold. One day it was lightening and thundering. And then it was back to being sunny.

Amid the backdrop of skyscrapers and city lights, one could still see distant flashes of lightning from the intense storm radiating the skies. The sound of thunder rolled from afar. Light drizzling came here and there. Nonetheless – *this* storm was passing. However, the storm, the **real** storm – Derron – was an intense and oppressive darkness hovering over Lexy's life. And *that* storm was still very much present… and it wasn't going to go away. Well, at least for now... And once it went away, another one was bound to come back. This was an unending hurricane season for Lexy.

"Baby, slow down a bit. The roads look slippery," Alexandria lightly grumbled as she sat back in the front passenger seat of Derron's Benz.

Derron smacked his teeth. "Bitch, concentrate and worry about the fucking story. Worry about that shit, not my fucking driving. Got it?" Derron groaned back as he zoomed through traffic like a bat out of hell. With his serious eyes glued to the road and his hands commanding the steering wheel through light traffic, Derron wanted to make sure Lexy had her shit straight. One-hundred percent. No holes. No gaps. The story had to be all the way consistent. Even the execution of how the story needed to be told had to be fucking flawless. If not, hospital staff along with the police were going to pick and prod the story until the truth finally came out. And once that happened, Derron knew his crazy ass was going straight to fucking

jail.

Derron, at first, didn't take Lexy straight to the hospital. They actually drove all the way down to the Far South Side of the city – the Roseland neighborhood to be exact – to make sure all of the details of her alleged story could be corroborated. Her descriptions needed to be accurate. Accuracy of describing the area in which this horrendous *crime* took place wouldn't have the police asking not only just a million questions but a million follow-up questions. From a previous similar incident, Derron knew how the police operated in situations like this. So, Lexy needed to know the streets. Needed to have a solid reason as to why she was in the area. Needed to have a thorough reason why she waited a few hours to go to the hospital. Why she didn't bother calling the police. Et cetera.

"Okay, so tell me, what exactly *happened* again?" Derron asked and took a quick glance over at Alexandria.

"I, umm, I was driving through Roseland and I got out of my car because the check light engine came on."

"And where were you at exactly?"

"130th and Michigan Avenue. I was near Altgeld Gardens."

"And why exactly were you out there again?"

"Looking for investment properties...I, umm, I do real estate investing. Property flipping."

"And who were the suspects? What did they look like and how many of them were there?"

"It was three of them. All black guys. They had on ski masks."

"And how could you tell their race if they had on ski masks?"

"'Cause none of them had on gloves to cover their hands. I saw the complexion of all of their hands."

"And how tall were they?"

"All of them seemed to be at least over 5'10. One was short and stubby. The two others were very skinny."

"Good…Please don't fuck this shit up…We're almost there."

Some twenty minutes later, the couple arrived at the front entrance of Northwestern Hospital in Downtown Chicago. The story – the seemingly *perfect* story – that the two concocted seemed to be fool-proof by now. Derron assumed that Lexy's account of the "mugging" and "potential sex assault" had just enough detail for the police to investigate but not enough to implicate.

The sketchy details surrounding the suspects were ambiguous enough not to have the police go out and arrest any ole random set of young black guys who fit Alexandria's description. That was the last thing Derron wanted, too. Yeah, the man was definitely an abusive and sadistic asshole, but he had enough empathy and conscience to not want to see a group of innocent black men go down over some

senseless bullshit. Especially some bullshit that was nothing more than a lie manufactured by another black man seeking to evade the criminal justice system.

Derron and Lexy got out of the car. All of a sudden, the theatrical act began just by the change in Derron's disposition. He started to act manic and fretful, pretending as if he'd just found out what happened to Lexy. Lexy, too, began to act nervous. Winds blowing from the lake cut through Lexy's jacket making her quake. But she intensified her body's own quaking to make it seem like she was in a state of extreme shock.

"You ready?" Derron asked.

"Yeah," Lexy replied, her mouth quivering from being cold, high and nervous.

"Good…" The two began to march into the emergency room, but before they walked through the automatic doors, Derron grabbed Lexy by the arm. He pulled her into his embrace, looked her deep into her scared, unblinking eyes. "You fuck this up and I'll fucking kill you. I mean it this time. I'll kill you, bitch. You understand me?"

"Ye-yeah," Lexy muttered. "I won't mess this up, babe."

"I know you won't. Especially if you wanna live."

Lexy didn't say anything. She just kept her gaze onto Derron, silently praying that she would be able to tell her story seamlessly without giving any hospital staff or police detective suspicion she was lying her ass off.

"Let's bounce. Start crying," Derron commanded. And just like that, without hesitation, tears began to roll out of Lexy's heavy eyes. Derron smiled. The two then rushed inside the ER.

"Someone help us! Please! We need help! Please!" Derron cried at the top of his lungs. Lexy wept and more tears came down her eyes. Derron assumed the sobs and tears were fake, but they were authentic – Lexy was scared for her life.

Moments later, Lexy was immediately checked into the ER.

~

By now Alexandria was *resting* in her bed. Derron, quiet yet attentive, was by her bedside. Some hours earlier, doctors and nurses had come in and performed a battery of tests followed up by treating her many wounds. Although she had cleaned most of her wounds immediately following the aftermath of the beating, the hospital staff still did their best to clean and dress up her still oozing abrasions and other injuries. At-home band-aids and small gauze couldn't contain some of the lashes and cuts on her face. A morphine and electrolyte IV was hooked to Lexy, evident by her drooling and dozing off. The morphine was

kicking in big time. Thank God. She needed the relief of hospital heroin to dissipate her high anxiety.

Nothing but chatter coming from a small television filled the quiet hospital room. Derron was watching a rerun of Law & Order. At any moment now, a nurse was coming to drop off discharge papers. Police had come earlier to take an account of everything that happened. Lexy, of course, put on one hell of a knockout performance for the investigators. Shit, you would've thought the woman was Taraji P. Henson gunning for an Oscar.

Knock-Knock!

Derron looked at the room door assuming with nurse ready to discharge Lexy. But it wasn't. Derron took a slight gulp as he scanned the short, stout black man standing there, dressed like the stereotypical homicide detective. The man was dressed in a cheap black suit – probably bought from off a clearance rack of JC Penny's. A long dark blue tie dangled from the neck of white dress shirt. Derron took a look at the man's shoes and was thrown off. *Why is this fat nigga wearing Jordan's?!?* Derron thought. Shit was pretty odd…

"Hey there. I'm Detective Bivens with the Sex Crimes Division of the Chicago Police Department. Can I speak with you all? I have a few questions in regards to the incident tonight…," the serious-toned detective announced.

"Sure thing, Detective," Derron responded with a fake grin.

"Thanks," the Detective said as he casually walked into the room, pulled a seat from out of the corner of the room and then pulled it up to the bed. "Do you mind?" he asked, wanting permission to sit next to Derron and Lexy near the bed. "No, not at all," Derron replied although he did fucking mind. *Fuck you gotta sit next to me for?!?* His nerves were now rattled. He didn't anticipate that another cop would roll through here at such last notice.

Knock-knock! Derron and the detective glanced at the door. It was the nurse. An older white woman with short blonde hair and tight green scrubs that were two sizes too small. "Alright, Ms. Alexandria! I got all of your discharge paperwork ready to go," the nurse announced said with an enormous smirk stretched across her chubby, wrinkled face.

Lexy slowly opened her hazy, glassy eyes and then turned her head toward the direction of the nurse. Her eyes weren't exactly staring at her though. "Mama?" she asked. That morphine drip had her ass tripping balls.

"No, doll. I'm not your mother. I'm just the nurse," the chubby woman laughed. "That morphine gettin' to ya, I see!"

Detective Bivens looked at the nurse. "Actually, can you give us five minutes, ma'am?" he asked. "I just have a series of follow-up

questions I need to ask."

"Okay, no worries, sir. I'll be right back."

"Thanks," the detective said and then turned his attention to Derron and Alexandria. "Sorry. I promise I'll be short. I just got back some notes from the responding officers here on site. I went over everything and I am just perplexed…"

"Perplexed by what, sir?" Derron asked. Crazy nigga was now getting nervous but he had to fight off any fretfulness not to make the detective suspect something was off.

"Well…I was going over the police report. She says that the robbery probably took place at around seven PM at the corner of 130th and Michigan Avenue."

"Yes…She said she was pulled over near the viaduct. Under the train tracks," Derron responded.

"Wow."

"Wow what?"

"That's some brazen ass shit. I mean, 130th and Michigan isn't necessarily the busiest part of town, but it sure isn't the quietest. So, there were *no* witnesses at all?" the detective asked as he scribbled notes, but his inquisitive eyes were latched onto Derron.

"Ughh, I don't think there were any," Derron responded. He then looked over at Lexy. She was in an off-and-on daze. "Babe, you said there weren't any witnesses, right?"

"Huh? Witnesses? Jehovah's Witnesses. They can't come to my house. No. I don't belee. BELEE. I don't beleeev that mess. My aunty is a Jehovah's Witness." Lexy was higher than Delta airplane in the sky. She wasn't making any sense, which for Derron was a good thing. In fact, he anticipated her gibberish answers were going to eventually make the detective leave. At least for now…

Derron glanced back at the Detective. "Yeah, sorry about that, Detective. It's the morphine."

"Uh-huh, I bet… Shit ain't nothin' but smack in an IV. I tell people all the time. I remember one time I busted my knee fucking around playing some football with my son. I got a prescription for some Vicodin. Took it one morning. Woke up the next afternoon. Shit felt like death."

"Yeah…" Derron paused for a moment and thought for a second. Where was the detective going with his line of questioning? Derron pondered. "Yeah, it is…I hate that stuff, too. I'm just fine with some aspirin. I—"

The detective interrupted and said, "So no witnesses?"

"Nah. That's not what she told me."

"And the three suspects. She said that they were all boys. Two of them were tall. The other short. She said she could make out their

race because their hands weren't covered."

"Yes. I believe so."

"Interesting…"

The detective took some more notes and then stood up. He looked at Derron and then back at Lexy. And then back at Derron once again. The slight smile he had on his chubby face just a few moments ago turned flat. "We'll be in touch. I might have a few more follow-up questions. If we find the suspects, we'll bring them in for a line-up and some questioning."

"Okay," Derron responded. "Thank you very much, sir."

The detective reached his hand out and replied with, "It's my duty."

The two shook hands and the detective quickly made his way out of the room. Once the coast was clear of prying officers, Derron got closer to Lexy and began to lightly slap her on her cheeks to wake her up. "Yo, wake the fuck up! That fat ass nigga just left."

"I want some crab legs with some extra garlic sauce. And some hush puppies," Lexy mumbled, beaming like a dopefiend who just shot up some pure Afghan raw.

"Shut up, bitch! Get the fuck out the bed so we can leave this motherfucker! Crab legs?!? Greedy ass bitch!"

Chapter Twenty

"Ughhh! Why isn't she picking up her phone?!?!"

Lacey threw her hands up in frustration as she manically paced her apartment, her phone glued to the side of her face. She'd been trying to call Alexandria ever since she got Derron's call hours earlier that he needed to cancel the date due to a 'family emergency'.

"This is Lexy! I'm not able to get to the phone right now but if you—"

"UGHHH! Girl! Where are you at?!?!? Why aren't you picking up your fucking phone?!?" Lacey growled, quickly ending the call once she heard Lexy's voicemail prompt.

She glanced down at the time on her phone. It was 11:21 PM. Lexy, wherever she was at, should've been home by now. It was the middle of the week and she assumed bestie had to have her ass in bed by now given she had to work in the morning. So she thought…

At the moment, she was honestly fed up with both Lexy AND Derron. Alexandria was probably out and about, living her best life. Running around with nigga or shopping her ass off. It seemed as if she didn't want to be bothered with nobody, not even her best friend. Whatever designer purse she was buying or dick she was riding had her so preoccupied that apparently, she wasn't attentive enough to at least acknowledge BFF's million phone calls or text messages. Shit, something could've been urgent. Lacey could've been experiencing a medical emergency or been in a bad car accident yet Lexy's nonresponsive ass was nowhere to be found. And Derron – well, ninety-percent of Lacey's frustration was really with him. She had been waiting for weeks now for the man to make his move. And when he did make it, he suddenly had to back out…All for a "family emergency".

Lacey wasn't necessarily the most perceptive person. However, she could tell something was off with Derron. From the tone of Derron's voice when he called apologizing, seeking to reschedule the date, she knew he was full of shit. It just seemed so random and out of place. Besides, he may have forgotten, but he *did* tell her weeks earlier that he wasn't necessarily super-close with his family. He only bothered with them during major holidays, if even that. What was exactly this

family emergency? she wondered. Lacey knew Derron's mother passed. She also knew he didn't have a relationship with his father. He also told her he wasn't close at all to his baby sister. So, did something happen to a cousin? Aunt? Uncle? Grandparent?

Whatever the excuse was, by this point, Lacey honestly didn't care anymore. And with the wasted money on the outfit, she was ready to move on from the prospect of dating Derron. Besides, she grew fond of him just as a trainer, not as someone she wanted to further pursue. Although she was no longer worried about money anymore, she still couldn't shake the feeling of being terminated. She loved her job. Really, loved her career. She couldn't fathom just letting things fall by the wayside, so after getting the disappointing news from Derron, she spent the remaining night at her computer applying to copywriter jobs left and right.

One of the positions was a marketing director for a nonprofit organization that operated domestic violence and homeless shelters throughout the Chicago metro area. Lacey never contemplated the idea of working for a nonprofit. In fact, one of her mother's friends worked for one. Ms. Veronica always complained to mama about how nonprofit jobs underpaid and overworked their people, so Lacey never gave a nonprofit career opportunity a single inkling of consideration. But hell, Lacey was financially secure, and truth be told, she felt like it was time to make a massive shift in her thirty-three years of life. Maybe working for a nonprofit would be a lot more fulfilling than working in Downtown, helping rich clients become even more rich. Anywho, Lacey was going to put herself out there, and if *Woman's Restoration Center* was going to pay right and give her creative latitude to do what she wanted, she'd hop on the opportunity.

Lacey finally decided to stop harassing Alexandria. *If she calls, she'll call*, she thought. She set her phone down on the coffee table. She then made her way into the kitchen to get some wine to sip on to assuage her agitation with everything and everyone. She'd already applied to like fifty jobs over the last three hours and she was burned out from staring at her laptop's screen.

Buzz. Buzz. Buzz.

Lacey jumped once she heard her phone vibrating on her coffee table. "Finally!" she exclaimed, dashing toward the table despite having a filled glass of red wine in her right hand. Some of it almost spilled out of the glass, but Lacey quickly slowed her pace, not wanting to mess up her living room's carpet. Now armed with caution, she set the glass of merlot down on the coffee table as she yanked her vibrating phone off of it at the same time. She assumed it was Alexandria finally calling her back. *I'm finne cuss this bitch out*, she thought but the grin on her face revealed she wasn't going to do just

that. She was gonna go off on her for not calling her back, but she was really set on groaning for the next hour or so about how Derron stood her up. That was really what she wanted to vent about. But once she saw the unfamiliar 301 number, she raised her brow out of suspicion wondering who was calling her from the DC area this time of the night.

She answered, “Hello?”

“Lacey! How are you?”

“Who in the hell is this?!?” Lacey replied, confused as hell. The voice sounded familiar though.

“Hah! This is Kobe!”

Lacey gasped. She clutched her mouth and sat down on her couch. “Kobe! Oh My God! I, ughh, I haven’t heard from you in a while! What’s going on?!? Why are you calling me this late at night!” Lacey thought for a moment. “Wait?!? How did you even get my number?!?”

Kobe was a neighborhood friend who Lacey dated briefly while they both went to Howard in DC. Although they had known each other for years, they didn’t take interest in one another until their sophomore year of college. He was truly her *first* love and she swore he was the one who’d eventually marry her and give her kids. Unfortunately, the relationship lasted all of seven months. They stopped talking to each other after Kobe decided to transfer from Howard University to a well-known arts school in Paris to study photography. They managed to stay in contact with one another, but like anything, with time, the communication seemed to fade. They were Facebook friends, and Lacey would occasionally check his profile to see his updates and pictures. He was always traveling. One month he was in the Sudan. Another month he was Germany. Just a few weeks ago, she saw a few pics of his from the UAE. She knew he was currently working as a photographer for National Geographic and always wondered if they would ever reconnect ever again.

“Hahah, yeah, I know right. Long time, no speak. I’m actually in town. I was in the neighborhood and ironically, I ran into your mother. She told me to give you a ring. She gave me your number…”

Lacey smiled and slapped her forehead. “Wow, so my mama just out here giving away folks’ phone numbers and what not.”

Kobe let out a light chuckle. “Yeah, well, I guess she thought I was still *good* enough to have it."

Lacey laughed.

“I’m sorry I’m calling you this late. I would’ve given you a call in the AM, but I didn’t want to hesitate. Oh, and she told me you weren’t working either.”

“Damn, so she just putting all of my business out there?!?” Lacey responded shaking her head in disbelief. Why was her mother just out

here spilling the deets? she wondered. But honestly, she didn't care. Kobe wasn't the judgmental type, unlike her former fiancée, Ken. He was laid back, armed with deep free-spiritedness. Free-spiritedness that at times made Lacey feel like she wasn't bold and daring enough to take risks. Lacey's mother and deceased father loved the shit out of Kobe and thought Lacey was a straight-up fool for not going with him to Paris. Crazy as it may seem, she had the opportunity to go, too, but she opted to stay in DC thinking she was making the right choice. The move to Paris seemed too impulsive and reckless for her at the time, and she didn't want to make the mistake of leaving the country and most importantly, all of her friends and family, simply to chase a man. At times, she regretted her decision but quickly moved on once she graduated and found herself back in Chicago to launch her career.

"Yeah, well, you know, your mother always trusted me with everything. I promise I won't tell a soul though," Kobe laughed.

"I bet…You were always her fave."

"Well, listen, I didn't want to hold you up, but I would like to see you. Soon, that is. Just to chop it up about old times. Wait…I'm sorry. It just slipped my mind…"

"What's that?" Lacey asked.

"You…You aren't dating anyone, are you? Am I interrupting you? It's pretty late at night."

"Oh, so now you ask?" Lacey laughed.

"Sorry…"

"No…I'm not dating anyone at the moment…Are you?"

"No."

Awkward silence came between the two of them.

"It's crazy how Hyde Park has changed immensely."

"Yeah, it's crazy, isn't it? The entire neighborhood is changing. Gentrification is a motha! So, how long are you in Chicago for?"

"Permanently…My contract with National Geographic ended and now I'm opening up my own studio."

The two talked for about a good two hours, reminiscing about old times. By now it was getting late.

"Well, I don't wanna hold you up any more," Kobe announced. "It was nice hearing from you, Lacey."

"Same here…"

"So…I was thinking…And no pressure…But I'd love to see you soon."

Lacey gulped and went silent.

"Can I take you out some time for some coffee?" Kobe then asked.

"Sure! Of course! I know this spot in Bronzeville! I'm so cool with the owner! I go there all the time. You wanna meet up there…Let's say around 10:30 AM?"

"Haha, yeah, well that can work…"

"Why are you laughing?" Lacey asked twiddling with her hair. She wasn't expecting the conversation nor the coffee date. All of this was just so unexpected, especially considering she would've gone out with Derron had he not canceled. But this last-minute phone conversation paired with a morning coffee date with a long-lost love interest seemed to make up for the stalled night.

"I didn't think you were going to say yes. And you already had a place in mind."

"Well, I just like to be proactive."

"So, this place. You're gonna send me the info and what not?"

"Yes! I'll text you the address and what not. Is this your cell?"

"Yeah, this is my number."

"Got it," Lacey said and then quickly locked the number into her phone's contacts.

"Well, have a good night, Lacey. I look forward to seeing you tomorrow."

"Same here, Kobe. Have a good night!"

The two hung up.

Lacey by now had a stunned expression etched on her face. She threw the phone on her couch and leaned over to grab her glass of wine. Life was weird. Just as she quickly got over Derron, she now found herself rekindling ancient feelings and emotions. Although Kobe physically looked the same since college (based on his FB photos), she wondered if his personality was the same. Did his charm and nice-guyness get swallowed up by an asshole-playboy persona? After all, he'd been traveling the world for the last decade or so. Never posted pictures of a relationship, let alone a significant other. Never posted any pictures of kids, so he didn't get anyone pregnant, she presumed. So many questions ran through her mind, but she didn't want to make the leap and think he was expressing that type of interest in her.

Lacey finished the glass of wine and started watching television. After some twenty minutes or so, the alcohol had her hazy and ready to call it the night. She propped herself up and turned the television off. Just as she was about to make her way into her bedroom, her phone began buzzing again. She glanced down…It was Alexandria. She answered the phone –

"BITCH! Where the *FUCK* have you been?!?! I've been trying to call you all damn it night, girl!"

Chapter Twenty-One

I should just kill this bitch right now. I got a feelin' Lacey ass ain't gonna be able to do shit. Bitch probably don't even have that much money. I need to call Jenn's ass, too, and take care of her. These bitches, I swear to God. I keep doin' this to myself. I'm gonna kill all these bitches and just keep my dick in my pants. Bitches always bringin' problems. Jake was right. I need to call his ass, too. FUCK! He probably ain't gonna wanna have shit to do with me now. Why I keep doin' this to myself?!? I'm just gonna kill everyone and start over. I'll pay them Russian muhfuckas back soon anyways. Get out the game for good.

The anxiety was running a million miles through Derron's brain as he drove through the city, rushing back to the condo. His blood was boiling as thought after thought drove him to almost having a nervous breakdown.

Buzz. Buzz. Buzz.

Derron took his eyes off the still-wet roads for a second and saw that Lexy's phone was once again vibrating. It was plugged into his car's charger, and the screen was facing up. Derron could see "LACEY" flashing on the screen. This was like the tenth time Lacey was calling Lexy.

"LEXY! LEXY! WAKE THE FUCK UP! Bruh, check your phone! You got all of them damn missed calls from Lacey! Call that bitch back before she get nervous!"

Lexy was crumpled in the passenger seat of the car, still half-dead from the morphine enslaving her body.

"Yo! You need fuckin' take a hit or something to wake the fuck up, bitch!" Derron growled as he sped down the highway, heading back to the West Loop. They got out of the hospital after receiving her discharge papers and while on their way back, Derron had to make a quick stop to pick up some cash and some extra stash from one of his *associates.* "Look in the back seat and get the shit!" Derron commanded.

"Okay," Lexy said as she slowly opened her eyes. She reached back, grabbed a black duffle bag and opened it on her lap. "Which bag is it?" she asked, her words mumbled.

“I think it’s the brown one…” Derron glanced over at Lexy, scanned her up and down in disgust, and then threw his gaze back on the road. “Don’t even know why the fucking doctors gave you that goddamn morphine. You over there lookin’ like a fucking zombie and we still got shit to do!”

Lexy didn’t say anything back to Derron as she opened the brown paper bag and saw a million orange-top vials of prepackaged cocaine. She took two out and then put the bag back into the duffle bag. She threw the duffle bag back into the back seat and went straight to sniffing the vials. In less than a minute, Lexy devoured both vials through her gaping nostrils. And within another minute, suddenly, she transformed into a hyper-productive employee, ready to execute whatever next instruction her boss gave her.

“Okay! I’M READY! WHAT YOU WANT ME TO DO NEXT? YOU WANT ME TO CALL LACEY?!? I CAN CALL HER RIGHT NOW,” she bellowed in the car in a peppy tone. Derron was unamused by her high energy and was seconds away from firing his fist right back into the woman’s mouth.

“Man, lower your damn voice! You sound high as shit right now! Call that wack ass bitch now and let her know you okay! And when we get back to the crib, take your ass straight to bed and don’t make a fucking move!”

“Okay! Baby! You want me to suck your dick, too?!?!” Lexy exclaimed, enthusiasm bouncing all over the interior inside of the Benz.

“NO! Just call the dumb ass bitch!”

“Okay! Okay! OKAY!”

Derron suddenly grabbed Lexy by her shirt collar with his right hand, his left hand commanding the steering wheel as he zoomed down the expressway. She gasped, quickly becoming scared that Derron was about to fuck her up again, and this time for good.

“Lower your GODDAMN voice. You gon sound high as a fucking kite, goddamnit!”

“Sorry…,” Alexandria apologized, scrambling and pulled her phone off the charging USB cable inside the car. With cocaine-induced swiftness laced in her fingertips, she pulled up Lacey’s number and dialed her.

Within two rings Lacey answered…

“BITCH! Where the *FUCK* have you been?!?! I’ve been trying to call you all damn it night, girl!”

“Oh, hey, girl. I’m sorry…” Lexy glanced over at Derron. Derron looked at her with a menacing scowl and widened his eyes, giving her that *suggestive* look. *Bitch, act right and stop playing stupid or I’ll kill you*. That thought sounded off in her head in Derron’s vicious, threatening

voice. “Girl, I just came back from this crazy night with this fine ass nigga. I’ll tell you more about it in the morning, I’m about to—”

“WAIT?!? What?!?” Lacey interrupted. “Sis, why didn’t you tell me earlier you were going out on a date? You didn’t say anything about that earlier?”

“Chile, I know! It just came up at the last minute. Where you at? You still out and about with Mr. Derron?” Lexy looked over Derron as she bit her nails. He nodded in agreement with her last comment and silently mouthed, “Good…”

“Girl, no. His ass literally called me maybe an hour right before he was supposed to pick me up. Talkin’ about he had a family emergency. I’m done with his ass, to be honest with you. I don’t like the back-and-forth games. He just seems…all over the place.”

“No, girl! Don’t do that. He really DID have a family emergency – I MEAN – how you know he ain’t have no emergency?!?” Lexy had to quickly correct herself.

Lacey was silent on the other end for a second before she said, “I don’t know. It just seems like something else came up and now he’s just using that as an excuse. I mean, the nigga told me he didn’t even have family like that just a few weeks back and now all of a sudden, you out here running to go tend to your people?!? Bitch, I think he’s fucking someone else and the bitch probably caught him off guard at the last minute.”

Lexy nervously chuckled. Derron couldn’t hear the conversation but was wondering what in the fuck Lacey was saying that had Lexy laughing.

“What the fuck is she saying?” Derron whispered.

Lexy looked at Derron and shook her head and widened her eyes. Lacey was still mouthing off. Lexy covered the bottom half of her phone with her hand and whispered back, “She says she’s mad at you. You stood her up…”

“FUCK!” Derron growled.

The yell was a bit loud enough to make Lacey halt her rant. “Girl, what the hell was that?!?”

“Ohh, just some asshole on the highway….”

“Wait, you’re driving right now?!? Girl, it’s late!”

“Chica! Calm down! I just told you I LITERALLY came back from the date,” Lexy retorted. “It ain’t that late! It’s just Wednesday, girl! Geesh!”

“But don’t you gotta work tomorrow?!? You told me you had a big meeting in the morning, Lexy!?!?”

“Bitch, why are you all up in my shit!?!? Worry about you! Don’t worry about me!” Lexy’s tone shifted into agitation and it was so discernible that even Derron could tell that Lexy was pissed.

Suddenly Derron grabbed Lexy again and growled in a low tone, “The fuck are you doing?!? Act normal!”

“Sorry,” she mumbled looking terrified.

“Alexandria! The hell?!? Is something wrong?!? What is *really* going on?”

“Girl, I’m sorry. I’m just agitated right now. Look, let me just call you tomorrow, okay? Girl, I’ve had a long night and you’re right. I got that big meeting in the morning. Let me get my ass home, okay?”

“Okaaaaaaayy…Well, I’ll holla at you later.”

“Okay, chica!” Lexy fake smiled.

“Oh, by the way. Girl, you won’t believe who called me?!?”

“Who?”

“KOBE! He’s back in Chicago. For good! I’m going to meeting up with him tomorrow at Sip & Savor over in Bronzeville. Girl, he’s opening up his own photography studio.”

“Woow!” Lexy responded, her eyes grew wide in slight disbelief. She knew Kobe, too. This wasn’t going to go over well, she quickly ruminated as she looked back over at Derron. He didn’t look at her, he just kept his eyes on the road. “Tell me more about it tomorrow,” she said.

“Okay, sis. Well, have a good night,” Lacey said and hung up.

Lexy put her phone back into her purse and exhaled.

“So, what the fuck she say? She really mad?” Derron asked.

“Yeah…she’s upset. She might be a bit over you now.”

“Why?!? I had a family emergency!?!? Is she that dense and unforgiving?!?”

“Well, she just felt it was last minute…That is all. And, ummm…” Lexy gulped. “Something else.”

“What?”

“Her…ummm…Her ex-boyfriend from college is back in town. They’re meeting up tomorrow.”

“What?!? GODDAMN IT, LEXY! You told me the fucking bitch wasn’t dating nobody!”

“She isn’t, Derron! This just happened!”

“THEN WHO THE FUCK IS THIS NIGGA?!?”

“He’s from college, babe! I swear!”

“BITCH, YOU LYING TO ME! Why would this nigga just show up unexpectedly!?!?”

“Derron, I swear! I didn’t know anything about this! He just showed up. I didn’t even think he lived in the US anymore!”

“You know what! You’re a useless, tired ass bitch! Now everything is gonna fall apart”

“I can fix this! I swear! I SWEAR I can fix this!”

Derron exited off the off-ramp and zoomed down the busy city

street, making his way back to the condo building. Derron came up to a stop sign and threw the car into park. Without hesitation, he grabbed Lexy and screamed, “Get the fuck out and walk yo ass back home, you tired ass, useless bitch! You just fucked everything up!”

“Derron, I can’t! I’m tired and I feel groggy! Babe, please, I can—”

SMACK! Derron slapped Lexy across her face.

“AHH! NO!” she screamed, thinking the violence was about to start all over again.

“I SAID GET THE FUCK OUT!” he screamed.

A car came up behind Derron and began honking. Derron rolled his window down and threw up his middle finger. The car behind him zipped around and pulled up next to his window. “FUCK YOU, ASSHOLE!” an old white man screamed and then took off. “FUCK YOU, TOO, PUSSAZ CRACKA!” Derron threw his gaze back onto Lexy and said, “Bitch, if you don’t get out of this car, I will go fucking OJ Simpson crazy on you!”

“Okay! Okay!” she yelled, scrambling to unlock the passenger door so she could get out but only Derron could unlock the doors. He unlocked them once he noticed Lexy couldn’t get out. And within a microsecond, Lexy burst out of her seat and onto the sidewalk. The condo was about a good two to three miles away. Despite having cocaine flooding her system now, the morphine had her legs feeling like they were chained to bowling balls. The thirty-to-forty-minute walk was going to take her over an hour. But at this point, she had no other choice. It was either walk in the dreary, windy cold – or get hacked to death…

She chose the long walk in the cold over the prospect of murder.

Chapter Twenty-Two

The second Lexy was out of the Benz, Derron threw the car back into drive. The front passenger door was still open. “CLOSE MY DOOR, BITCH!” Derron commanded.

Following the stern instruction, Lexy did just that – she quickly slammed the car door.

“Ole stupid ass bitch! Knew all that fuckin’ time that fuckin’ slut was with another fuckin’ nigga!” Derron grumbled as he took off. He glared at his rearview mirror and saw Lexy dragging her feet down the sidewalk. “Ole, stupid, silly ass hoe.”

Once Derron got down the street, he cut the corner and decided at the last minute to head over to his other townhouse where Erica was staying. She’d been blowing his phone all night, too, but he was ignoring her calls and text messages. He hadn’t even bothered to even see why she was harassing him. Probably some stupid shit, he figured. *Bitch just want dick and some money to go shopping.* Derron grabbed his phone and saw he had like seven missed calls from the *other* girlfriend. Then, he checked his messages as he pulled up to another stop sign

Erica: Where are you, babe? Miss you…

Erica: Can you CashApp me $30? I’m hungry and want something to eat.

Erica: Babe why are you ignoring my calls and texts?!? Please just let me know you’re okay. That’s all.

Erica: Derron. These guys are here at the place looking for you. When will you be back?

Erica: Derron. CALL ME ASAP. Please!

Erica: DERRON THESE GUYS ARE LOOKING FOR YOU.

“FUCK!” Derron screamed and suddenly put his foot on the gas pedal, instantly

zooming down the street. Those *guys* – Derron knew exactly who they were. It was Vlad and his squad. They were a crew associated with the Zelensky Family, the Chicago Russian Mafia.

Derron’s heart rate ticked up to a thousand beats per minute as he raced down Lake Shore Drive, trying his quickest to get to the townhouse over in the South Loop. “Fuck, fuck, fuck!” Derron

grumbled, hoping Vlad didn't do anything crazy. Erica had no deal who those guys were, let alone know that Derron currently had a business relationship with them. God, please don't let them do anything. Please, don't let them do anything, the man prayed as he kept his now sweaty hands locked onto the steering wheel of the whip.

Time seemed to slow down and Derron felt like he couldn't get to the townhouse fast enough. Suddenly, he saw flashing lights from behind him. He looked up into the rearview mirror. Headlights flashing from what appeared to be an all-black SUV filled the Benz, piercing Derron's eyesight. Then, out of nowhere, another all-black Suburban pulled up to the side of the Benz. Derron couldn't see, but then another one sped around from the Suburban from behind his car and then pulled in front of Derron and came to a complete halt. Derron, right then and there, already knew what time it was. He quivered in his seat as he manically tried to open his front console to grab his gloc. *War time*. But just as he was about to grab his blickie, masked men in all leather black jackets holding assault rifles emerged from the trucks. One of them began knocking ferociously on the driver's side window. Derron gasped.

"Don't move or we'll fucking kill you!" the masked man growled. "OPEN UP THE DOOR!"

"FUCK!" Derron screamed. "I was gonna call Vlad back! I swear!"

"TOO LATE! OPEN THE FUCKING DOOR!"

"Come on, man!"

All of a sudden, the masked man took the butt of the rifle and slammed it into the window. Another masked man, someone much bigger and taller, quickly reached in, unlocked the door, and in one swoop, grabbed Derron from out of the driver's seat.

"GET THE FUCK IN, MOTHERFUCKER!" the tall, brawny masked soldier roared and threw Derron into the back of suburban adjacent to the Benz. The way the masked men positioned the Suburbans around Derron's car created the perfect cover to disguise the well-executed kidnapping.

"Come on, guys! Please! I swear to Go—"

"SILENCE!" a dark voice interrupted and bellowed throughout the Suburban. All of a sudden, one of the masked men came up from behind where Derron was seated and wrapped his long, muscular arm around Derron's neck. Another masked solider held Derron's legs down as he tried to fight them off. The same soldier who had his arm griped around Derron's neck swiftly pulled out handkerchief doused in some unknown solution. Then he dug the cloth into Derron's face, forcing him to breathe in whatever odorous chemical was laced into it. Derron attempted to scream for help. Crazy how this crazy nigga

now found himself vulnerable, overpowered by forces much stronger and more violent than him. But his mouth was completely muzzled. He would've tried to fight off the man's grip, but now, other men inside the car were holding him down, punching him incessantly with the butts of their rifles until his resistance disappeared.

Within seconds, Derron's urge to fight back dissipated. His head sunk to the side. Derron completely blacked out. Vladimir, one of the mafia soldiers inside of the Suburban, took off his mask laughing in a thick Russian accent, "Fuckin' black guys can't fight for shit."

~

"Wake up, Derron…Wake up…" An old, short and scrawny white man with a head full of gray hair paced an empty, dimly lit warehouse. The old man locked his eyes onto Derron as he circumambulated around him. Derron was sitting in a steel chair, his hands and feet bound by thick brown rope to the chair. His eyes were completely covered with a bloodied white t-shirt. He was also naked, his body drenched in the combination of sweat and blood leaking from a few gashes and wounds on his torso and legs.

"I SAID WAKE UP!" the old man roared, his voice traveling throughout the vast warehouse.

Derron gasped and his bound body quaked in the chair. His head turned from left to right in very swift movements as if he was trying to ascertain where he was. But he couldn't discern his whereabouts given all he could perceive at the moment was radiating pain and darkness.

"Where am I?!? Come on, Mr. Stan! I swear to God I was gonna pay you! I had been meaning to give you a call!" Derron instantly knew what was going on. He was kidnapped and now was being held up in an undisclosed location by one of his major business *investors* – Stanislav "Mr. Stan" Zelensky, head of the Chicago Russian Mafia family. Vladimir, one of his top enforcers, stood off to the side holding a huge hunter's knife in his hand.

"You are where you're supposed to be," Mr. Stan barked as he continued to pace the floor in a circle, his devilish blue eyes still attached to Derron's naked, battered body.

"Please. Mr. Stan. I'm working on getting you the $50,000, I swear to God! I'm almost done. I'm just trying to—"

"Derron, Derron, Derron…I don't give a fuck about the $50,000. I make that in an hour. What I care about is you showing me respect. Honoring your agreement. Your word is supposed to be your bond. Remember?"

"Yes! I know. Please. I've just been having some difficulties. I got just copped a new package tonight and I'm tryin' to flip it quickly! I

also got this girl I'm tryna—"

"Speaking of girl…" Mr. Stan then looked at Vlad and said something in Russian. Vlad then disappeared and then re-emerged not even a half-minute later dragging a body bag across the floor.

"Take the rag off his fucking face so he can see the consequences of not paying debts in a timely fashion," Mr. Stan commanded. Another soldier standing off to the side ran up to Derron and yanked the bloodied makeshift rag from off the man's head.

Soon as the rag came off, Derron's eyes widened in fear as he took in the several men surrounding him, Mr. Stan standing right in the center of him. He couldn't even blink and didn't want to – because these men in one blink would end his life. He was sure of that given the stoic, expressionless looks on their pale faces.

"Open the bag," Mr. Stan then commanded. Vlad reached down and unzipped the bag. Mr. Stan pulled out a handkerchief from his suit jacket pocket and clutched his mouth. The smell of rotting flesh instantly wafted in the air, overpowering the Russian mob boss's nostrils. Vlad didn't seem moved though by the smell. Guess he was used it... The enforcer then dragged the bag close for Derron to see it's contents.

"Remember her?" Mr. Stan asked.

Derron looked down and gasped. "NOO! PLEASE! NOOOOOO!" he cried once he took in the familiar face.

Chapter Twenty-Three

The familiar face – it was Adrianna…There was some semblance in her face, but the rotting and bloating had all but disfigured her body. The color of her face was a combination of blue and green. Her mouth was gaped open. Even her eyes. Such a scary sight for Derron to behold, but he quickly turned away not wanting to have the image further etched into his PTSD-wracked mind. Such an image was now for sure going to give him intense nightmares.

And this was NOT one of his usual, horrible dreams. For a split second, he swore perhaps he was in the middle of one his panic-filled, nightmarish hallucinations. But he could feel every inch and iota of the realness of the situation.

"No, don't turn away! Take it in! Take it all in so you can see the consequences of your irresponsibility, Mr. Harrington!" Mr. Stan roared with a heavy laugh. Vlad then sauntered over to Derron, grabbed his head and forced his sight into the direction of Adrianna's body.

"Actually…make him smell her. Make him take in his lover's rotting flesh," Mr. Stan commanded and then stood back to watch the next few events unfold. Doing as he was instructed, Vlad instantly kicked the chair that Derron was sitting in down. Derron crashed to the floor. "AHH! FUCK!" Derron screamed out in pain once the side of his body collapsed to the cold, concrete warehouse floor.

With Derron still bound and unable to move, Vlad towed the chair by one of its legs. A horrid screech coming from two of the metal legs scratching the cracked floor filled the stale, semi-dark air. The sharp sound muted the sound of bugs and other vermin crawling throughout the dilapidated warehouse.

Derron's face was now centimeters away from Adrianna's. Vlad reached down and grabbed his head and pushed it up against the cold, hard, rotting side of Adrianna's face. "Give her a kiss! She misses you so much," Vlad laughed, exposing a mouth filled with gold teeth.

"No!" Derron cried, attempting to turn his face the other way but Vlad forced his head still. "NOO!" Derron continued to sob.

"I SAID KISS IT!" Vlad screamed. He pulled out a gun hoisted from

his back and held the end of the gun toward Derron's temple. "KISS HER OR DIE!"

Derron sobbed. His mouth trembled in fear and disgust. He didn't have a choice at this point, so he planted a soft kiss onto the woman's rotting cheek flesh. Within seconds, he hurled up vomit nonstop, emptying out any food or liquid he had over the last twenty-four hours.

"Enough…," Mr. Stan said shaking his head. He sauntered over to Derron and leaned down. He whispered into his ear, "That's the first surprise of the night. I have more…" Mr. Stan then stood up and screamed, "BRING THE REST OF THEM OUT!"

Chapter Twenty-Four

Despite throw up still pouring from his mouth, Derron quickly muzzled his nausea, wondering who "them" was. Then, out of nowhere, two of Mr. Stan's soldiers escorted Erica and Jake into the center of the warehouse floor. Both of them, too, were completely naked. They were blindfolded. Their bodies sweating and quaking out of fear as to what exactly was happening.

"Oh fuck! FUCK!" Derron screamed once his eyes registered who they were.

"I figured this would get your attention…," Mr. Stan said as he took a cigar out of his jacket pocket and lit it up. He took a huge puff and blew smoke in small circles through his puckered lips.

"Derron! What's going on?!?" Jake screamed as he looked away frantically, but couldn't see shit. "DERRON! Baby! What's happening! TELL US! PLEASE!" Erica cried.

"Just calm down!" Derron replied. "It's gonna be okay! I promise!"

"Is it?" Mr. Stan announced and then walked over to Derron. He leaned down and whispered, "Good choice in women by the way. I wanna see you all in action."

"Huh?"

"Yeah, I wanna see you all fuck each other," Mr. Stan said and took another puff from his cigar. "I love to see the niggers fuck each other on the pornos. You and your big dicks…"

"Man, bro, you can't be for real right now!" Derron said and looked back over at Jake and Erica. Extreme guilt came over him. They had absolutely no idea what was going.

Derron got himself caught up with the Russian Mafia some years ago. After he got out of the military and started up his fitness business, unbeknownst to him he started training one of the granddaughters Mr. Stan. Her name was Natalya, and from the moment Derron laid eyes on her, he knew he had to have her. She had the fattest ass he'd ever seen on a Russian bitch. And, of course, it didn't take Derron that long after training her to dig up into her guts.

He ended up having a long, juicy sexual relationship with the Russian dame…that was until Mr. Stan found out. Mr. Stan didn't

approve of the situation and had Natalya dealt with – sent her black dick-lovin' hoe ass back to Mother Russia so she could settle down with someone from among her own kith and kin.

However, Mr. Stan ironically took a liking to Derron and his business venture. In exchange for not outright killing him, he decided to extort Derron and force him into using BeastCORE as an elusive money-laundering front for his illegal activities.

Of course, Derron didn't want to die, so he had no other choice but to oblige to Mr. Stan's demands. Sadly, Kelsey, his business partner had no idea that Derron was even involved with the Russian Mafia. When Kelsey first started seeing the flow of cash coming into the books, he asked Derron where he got the large mounds of cash from. Nothing was making sense, but Derron lied and assured him that he was able to raise capital from his network of childhood friends, others he knew from the military, along with some others he met along the way.

Derron, at first, assumed that Mr. Stan just wanted him to clean a few hundred thousand and be done with him. Nope, Mr. Stan had him cleaning millions of dollars of drug and illegal gambling profits.

Derron simply did as he was told and for years he never had any problems out of Mr. Stan…That was until recently. Derron's knack for pussy and dick began to spiral out of control. He was spending large sums of cash left and right on buying real estate, cars, clothes and unfortunately, drugs.

Despite running one of the most popular fitness studios in the city, the reality was the business was struggling. Derron had many clients, but none of the money they paid was ever enough to keep up with all of the crazy business expenses. Leasing a major building in Downtown Chicago was expensive as shit but that wasn't the only thing hurting the business. Hiring qualified staff and retaining them was one thing. Marketing another. Don't even mention maintaining all the crazy fitness equipment to Derron. That shit was costing him at least $15,000 a month. Supplies. Utilities. The list of expenses went onto eternity it seemed to Derron.

Although Mr. Stan was paying Derron for his "services", Derron's sex addiction and drug habit virtually had him living paycheck-to-paycheck. Once things got super-bad and Derron realized he couldn't muster up another lie to tell Kelsey and his father, Derron went to Mr. Stan seeking a $250,000 loan to help him get out of the arrears.

Mr. Stan agreed but gave Derron stiff repayment conditions. The plan was for Derron to repay him $50,000 a month with five percent interest until the debt was repaid in full. No ifs, ands or buts.

See, Mr. Stan could've easily charged him twenty or even as much as thirty percent on the money he lent. This was typical in the mob

money lending business: Mr. Stan operated in such fashion with others that sought his financial assistance. However, he felt like he was already taking enough from Derron. So, he spared subjecting him to his typical loan shark contracts.

Derron was able to make good on the repayments…until two months ago. Old habits die hard and somehow, Derron managed not come up with the money. Mr. Stan seemed to not care at first, but then things went south once Derron came back the following month with the same pathetic excuse. *"Sorry, Mr. Stan, but the business keeps sucking me dry. I had to buy this. Buy that. BeastCORE needs this."*

Mr. Stan obviously wasn't buying the excuses? Why? Because like a good businessman, the mob boss kept tabs on Derron. He knew how he was spending every single dime he came across. He just didn't say anything because he assumed Derron operated with integrity. But now that Mr. Stan's presumption turned out to be inaccurate, he was ready to show Derron the consequences of being deceitful.

Derron continued shaking his head, protesting the prospect that Mr. Stan wanted him to put on a sex show before everyone's eyes. And then he also wasn't going to subject Erica and Jake to any of this, especially considering they had absolutely no idea what was going on.

"It's either you fuck them while I jack off…or everyone dies…Your choice, Mr. Harrington," Mr. Stan said, still taking slow and deliberate tokes from his cigar.

"Please! No! Derron, please don't make me do this!" Erica cried, begging not to be humiliated in front of all of these unknown eyes. Although she knew Jake from the gym, she had no idea that Jake and Derron were actually fucking each other. Although she and Derron had sexual trysts where other men were involved, and some of those men often engaged in homoerotic behavior with Derron, she couldn't see herself suddenly having sex with Jake. Nothing about him turned her own and she always saw him as a bit flamboyant.

"It's his choice, young lady. Not yours. Should've never fucked with this lying asshole anyways," Mr. Stan laughed. He then turned his attention to Derron and asked, "So, what is it?"

Derron took a deep breath and then closed his eyes. "Fine…," he muttered.

"AHHH! PLEASE, NO!" Erica cried. "DERRON! BRO! Don't do this! Get us out of this shit!" Jake screamed.

"It's gonna be alright, guys! We gotta do this! It'll be over soon! I promise," Derron said.

Mr. Stan then signaled to Vlad to come and untie Derron. Another mafia soldier took the blindfolds off Erica and Jake. Both of them instantly looked at each other and then threw their full gaze onto Derron. Derron stood up from out of the chair and massaged his

aching wrists and forearms.

Mr. Stan scanned Derron up and down laughing. “You are pathetic,” he uttered and took another puff from his cigar. The mob boss then looked at Vlad and said something in Russian. Vlad then said something in Russian to the two gunmen standing next to Erica and Jake.

POW! POW!

Chapter Twenty-Five

"NOOOO! NOO!" Derron screamed as he watched both Erica and Jake slump to the ground.

"Ahh!Ahh!" Jake moaned. Erica was lifeless though. She was shot in the back of her head, swiftly ending her life. Jake was shot closer to his neck, so the gunshot didn't instantly kill him. But now, as it did appear his life was fading away, the bisexual buff trainer took slow, shallow breaths that could be heard from a mile away.

One of the mob henchmen yelled something in Russian. Vlad said something back and then, without hesitation, the two gunmen then hovered over both bodies and let out slug after slug into their bodies.

POW! POW! POW! POW! POW!

"NOO!" Derron cried and attempted to run up to the gunmen. Little too late for that, buddy. However, before he could Vlad grabbed him and threw a stone-hard punch to his stomach, rendering him motionless and out of air. Vlad grabbed his shoulder and then shoved him down to the ground. "Don't move…," the mob enforcer said. Vlad then held the gun up to Derron's head. "Time to die."

Just as he was about to pull the trigger, Mr. Stan yelled for Vlad to pause in Russian. The mob boss walked over to the lifeless bodies, examined them and then sauntered back over to Derron. He took another pull from his cigar and said to Derron, "I think that's worth about the rest of what you owe me…Have a nice life and good luck with the business, Mr. Harrington." Mr. Stan then smiled, blowing smoke in his face. He walked coolly walked off. But before he finally made his exit, he said something in Russian. Then all of a sudden, the Russian mob henchmen grabbed Derron and took him to another room within the warehouse.

Chapter Twenty-Six

I need help. I need help. Girl, run. You need help. The ruminations of escape were nonstop. Poor Lexy stood in her bathroom, her body twitching and quaking. Sweat beads ran down her face. The mix of cocaine and percocets made her sweat profusely.

Buzz. Buzz. Buzz.

Lexy looked down at saw she got a notification. "AHH!" she moaned and threw her hands up in frustration once she realized it wasn't Derron, but someone sending her a DM on her IG account. Since kicking her out of the car last night and forcing her to walk home, she hadn't heard a word from him. She was terrified thinking it was Derron.

She was staring at herself in her bathroom mirror for what seemed like hours. Her strained, unblinking eyes were shot open, gawking intensely at how damaged her face was.

The merciless punishment wrought onto her body by Derron was now fully manifesting. Every single gash, cut, scrape and bruise shone in full, vivid color.

Hard reality was setting in. And now Lexy knew she was in too deep with Derron's bullshit. Lexy never imagined in a thousand years that she would find herself in this violent, precarious situation – being in love with a man who was taking her through so much extreme turmoil.

Lexy's nose was on fire from coking up all night and into the morning. The combination of a rabid cocaine addiction and a broken nose was causing her to sniffle and sneeze nonstop. However, the incessant sinus problems didn't deter her from analyzing the damage inflicted upon her once immaculate face.

Bitch, he's gonna kill you once he finds out you've been snorting up his entire stash! she thought at the moment. And that was why she contemplated just packing up as much of her shit as possible and running away for good.

Derron didn't mind if she used a few vials here and there. But since walking back home last night after her long, tumultuous night with her 'boyfriend', Lexy had gone through at least fifty vials. Her blood

pressure was super-high. Everything around her seemed to be collapsing and exploding all at the same time. However, the tragic irony was that getting super-high as fuck was the only thing helping her mitigate the mental and physical anguish she was currently experiencing.

She continued to stare at herself, ready to just fall into a sea of her own sobs and tears. This was not the life to be had and God only knew what people were going to say once they saw the many bruises and gashes on her face. Even the swollenness was so apparent. *Girl, what mama gon say when you see her? Daddy? Ughh, and Lacey! She's gonna know something is up! She's gonna know something bad happened. What's another lie you can come up with?!? Think, girl, think!* Her scattered, scared mind was going into overdrive.

If people saw her right now, Lexy knew she couldn't lie and say she got into a car accident. Couldn't even lie and say she fell down the stairs of her condo or slipped on a sidewalk. Her many wounds made it so obvious that someone put their hard and heavy hands all over her and fucked her up big time. Sure, the mugging story would work, but the more she thought about it, the more she felt so low having to concoct a story just to protect Derron and his insanity.

Damn, damn, damn, Lexy thought, wanting to release a trillion tears from her reddened eyes, but she couldn't. She cried all night to the point that her eyes were dehydrated. Lexy took another glance at herself before she leaned down and took a quick sniff from a line of coke on her bathroom's sink countertop.

Bitch! Why did you get yourself involved with this fuckin' lunatic?!? You are so pathetic! So FUCKING PATHETIC! YOU STUPID ASS BITCH! You are a liar! A royal disgrace to your family. You put everything on the line for this dude just 'cause he got good dick. Bitch, you are stupid! And worse of all, you are a tragic, low-life crackhead. You're a pathological liar. You lied to your friend. Your best friend. She's been there for everything. Through thick and thin. And now you're trying to help this nigga finesse her just to get him out of a bind.

The dreadful, anxiety-wracked thoughts were speeding through the high woman's mind like a Chinese bullet train. She couldn't fathom how one event after another led her to this point: she was helping Derron take advantage of Lacey.

"FUCCKKK!" Lexy roared once the line of coke blasted through her nostrils and straight to her brain. A rush of energy jolted Lexy to stand upright and tight like she was a soldier ready to go to war. "I gotta go! I gotta go! I can't keep doin' this!" Lexy mumbled, her drug-induced words scattered and almost indiscernible. Suddenly, Lexy scrambled to clean up all of the empty coke vials splattered all throughout the countertop. Her eyes darted from left to right in rapid motions. Every

single muscle in her body twitched out of trepidation that she was potentially making the wrong move. A move that could land her six feet deep in a grave. Or in a lake…Who knew what Derron would do to her once she tried to escape and possibly get in his trouble with the law.

Lexy paused for a moment. Flashes of Derron's beautiful smile came into view. Then she quickly remembered their passionate lovemaking. The time he took her to Paris. The time he promised her the world and that once things got settled, he was going to make things official with her. *But you love his ass, girl. Stop and think for a second…He already told you he was going through some things. You keep fucking agitating him. You pushed him to do this to you. He already told you Jenn was just side pussy. Nothing more, nothing less. If anything, you need to find that white bitch and beat the brakes off her ass! Don't let that bitch try to take your man down.*

"That's it! You right, Lexy! Go back to that Macy's and find that white bitch and fuck her ass up! I'mma kill that bitch! She gon fuck around and try to expose my mothafuckin' man. I should go and murder that hoe and that baby she's carrying!" Lexy said, still scrambling to clean up the filthy sink countertop.

A two-year-long addiction to cocaine, thanks to Mr. Derron himself, now had her wishy-washy ass competing with the coke-snorting greats like Ike Turner and Rick James. "Yeah! That's what I'm gonna DO! I'm gonna FUCK THAT BITCH UP!" Lexy screamed and quickly yanked another vial from the stash. She flicked the orange top off the vial. With crackhead swiftness, she poured the coke onto the countertop and used a somewhat rusty shaving blade to convert the small mound into three, two-inch-long lines. Without hesitation, she dived right into the first line and snorted it. "AHHHH!" she bellowed and then began to sneeze uncontrollably. Once her sneezing seemed to subside, she went straight for the other two lines, finishing them both in less than twenty seconds.

Her blood pressure was now at a tipping point. Her eyes were now glassy; her pupils hyper-focused to any and everything present in the bathroom. Sound and light were making her a tad nauseous since her senses were in overdrive. "Come on, girl! Just leave! Stop fucking with this crazy nigga! He's going to fucking kill you!" Lexy screamed to herself. The back-and-forthness of wanting to leave or stay threw Lexy into a manic state, so much so to the point where she was ready just to grab anything sharp she could get her hands on and just slit her wrists and even throat. "AHHHHH! AHHHH!" All of a sudden, she fell to the ground and rocked back and forth uncontrollably. "I CAN'T TAKE THIS ANYMORE! I CAN'T TAKE IT!" she cried.

Lexy then stood up and threw her eyes onto a bottle of percocets

sitting on the countertop. It was either suicide at this point, or continue to go along with the crazy ride with Derron. She didn't want to truly kill herself, but she couldn't bring herself to escape and find help. If she did, everything would unravel. All of her secrets. All of her lies. Everyone would disown her. Her parents. Her siblings. But more importantly –Lacey. Once Lacey found out what Lexy was *truly* up to these last few weeks, she would lose more than just a best friend – she would lose her soul. But at this point, Lexy had already lost her soul, and that she was aware of. So, at this very moment, the permanence of death seemed more appealing than living in chaos. She dashed toward the bottle of percocets, opened her mouth and spilled the entire bottle of pills into her mouth. She then rushed the bathroom sink, turned on the faucet and gulped water to force the pills down. She swallowed at least ten pills, which was more than enough to put down a horse. Within seconds, the lethal dose of percocets began to kick in. Lexy felt a heavy coldness swarm her body. Her heart slowed. Her eye lids were like bricks, sinking her eyes to deep sleep. Darkness set in and she fell to the icy bathroom tile floor.

Chapter Twenty-Seven

"Guantanamera! Guajira guantanamera! Guan-tana-merrrrra!"

A slightly older middle-aged Hispanic woman sung at the top of her lungs as she exited off a crowded CTA bus.

Her name was Maria Sanchez – and from the riveting performance she was putting on at the corner of the bus stop, you would've thought she was the reincarnation of the famed Cuban singer, the late and great Ms. Celia Cruz.

Still humming and dancing, Maria walked her bubbly Puerto Rican self down the sidewalk and up to Lexy's condo.

It was sunny outside on this Friday morning. Despite it being fall, the rising temperature made it seem like it was a warm July morning. Today was the start of a new month. October was also Maria's favorite month which explained her early morning euphoria. But she was also elated since it was payday. Ms. Sanchez was ready to get the day started so she could collect her coins and have a blast this weekend.

Pigeons were chirping, harmonizing with Maria as she continued to hum the celebrated Cuban folk song.

Although a daycare teacher by trade, Maria started her own independent cleaning business and had been working for Derron for some years at his gym. She was also hired by him to be a cleaning lady for his other properties. She came by at least once a week to clean Lexy's (and Derron's) condo.

Built like the stereotypical puertoriqueña, Maria was short, a tad stubby and had a head of thick, curly black hair and then down to her shoulders. She strolled up to the front door of the posh condo building, pulled out her access card and then let herself in. There were some newspapers and coupon magazines spread on the ground near the mailboxes inside the foyer. Maria leaned down and picked them up and then she noticed the building needed some maintenance. "Ayyy! No, no, no! Mr. Derron need to hire a painter ASAP!" she commented in her thick Spanish accent, also taking notice that some paint was chipping from the walls inside the building's foyer. Once she made it to Lexy's unit, she unlocked the door and walked into the condo, assuming nobody was home…

Maria didn't waste any time – she went straight to work, first starting with cleaning up the kitchen. She glanced around and not much needed to be cleaned up. She looked at the stove and saw that it was nearly eight am. She figured that if she could just run through the house quickly, spray some air freshener, vacuum the floors and clean the bathrooms, she could squeeze in an extra cleaning appointment for the day to make an extra $100. Her abuela's birthday party was coming up and she wanted to buy her this necklace she saw the other day at the Piercing Pagoda in Riverside Mall.

Maria, now armed with a plan to get the cleaning over with, went straight to the master bedroom. She was now humming something different in Spanish, but the moment she opened the master bedroom's door, the singing came to a complete halt. She was instantly hit with shock when she saw how much disarray the room was in.

Something was off. Completely off…This wasn't like Lexy or Derron. Out of all of the years she'd been working for the *secret* couple, she'd never seen the room in such mess. The mattress was pulled off the bed, damn near flipped on its right side. All the shelves on the dressers in the room were pulled open. Clothes were splattered everywhere. There was a suitcase lying on the ground, and clothes spilling out of it like lava. Maria, cautious more than ever, walked up to the huge suitcase and saw an attempt had been made to pack it. The clothes inside weren't even folded neatly. It appeared as if someone was in a sudden rush to pack as much shit as possible and dip out.

Maria's natural impulse was to first call Derron or Ms. Lexy and then call 9-11. Someone obviously burglarized the condo, she presumed. Suddenly, she scrambled to pull out her flip cell phone and call the authorities. Her hands quaking and sweating out of fear, she dialed 9-11 but then immediately hung up the phone. Her natural instincts informed her to put a pause on getting the cops involved. *Maybe Derron and Lexy got into a fight?* she wondered. And if that was the case, she didn't want to interject herself into their situation. Shit, Derron paid good money and even tipped. She didn't want to pry into a domestic situation. She re-opened her phone and pulled up Derron's contact info as she then made her way into the bathroom.

"AHHHH! AHHHHHHHH! AY MIO DIOS!" she screamed to the heavens once she saw Lexy on the bathroom floor, motionless. Was she lifeless? "MS. LEXY! MS. LEXY! ARE JU OKAY?!?!" she asked in a yell but paced the floor, wondering what her next move was going to be. She leaned down and began fervently shaking the seemingly lifeless woman. "MS. LEXY! PLEASE SAY SOMETING!" She ran a hand over neck.

Lexy still had a pulse…

Chapter Twenty-Eight

"WAKE UP, FAG BOY!" Vlad screamed as he emptied a bucket of pissy warm water onto Derron's naked body.

The man was in and out of consciousness, laying on the ground inside of an unfurnished office inside of the warehouse. "Ahh! AHHH!" Derron groaned, his eyes blasted wide open out of trepidation as he saw Vlad along with two other Mafia soldiers hovering over him.

He had been nestled up in a room inside of the warehouse after watching Jake and Erica get killed. He didn't know what time it was but presumed it had to have been around six or seven in the morning.

"LOOK! Please, don't kill me, man! I promise! I promise I can pay ya'll back!" Derron sobbed, barely able to stand to his two feet.

Vlad shook his head and chuckled. "Nobody is going to kill you. Your debt is cleared. Now put your fucking clothes on so we can take your pathetic ass back home," the head mafia enforcer responded and threw a pile of clothes at Derron. Vlad along with the two Mafia soldiers stood there and watched him get dressed. Once he had he had his shit on, the men grabbed him, blindfolded him and then led him out of the warehouse.

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"Stay out of trouble, motherfucker!" Vlad growled and threw Derron out of the Suburban and onto the sidewalk in front of the condo. Once the door was closed, the truck sped off.

Derron, battered and bruised from the nonstop hours of torture, stood up holding his side. He knew he had a few cracked ribs and needed to get to the hospital ASAP. "Shit!" he grumbled through his bloodied mouth.

After seeing Erica and Jake get killed before his very own eyes last night, he knew with absolute certainty he was next on the list. Ain't no way in the hell Mr. Stan was just going to let him walk away like that. Although Mr. Stan cleared his debt by way of executing his lovers, Derron didn't trust the mafia boss and needed to skip town as soon as possible.

He was going to empty out all of his bank accounts, raid his safes, grab his coke stash and hit the road to Atlanta. He had a house down there in Alpharetta and figured he could hide out until he plotted his next moves. *Fuck Kelsey*, he thought. *White boy will figure shit out on his own.* And from the way Kelsey was talking, it seemed like at any moment, his business partner was going to take everything away from him because of the Jenn situation…Speaking of which, Derron needed to get a hold of her ass. But he'd handle that later. For right now, he needed to get Lexy's ass squared all the fuck away. He would've taken her with him but he didn't have the capacity to have an accessory or a sidekick. He was now on his own and didn't want the responsibility of having to tend to a fretful, anxious woman with a nasty drug habit.

Derron cautiously scanned the quiet neighborhood block, trying to assure himself that he wasn't being watched. Shit, Mr. Stan and Vlad could've still been right around the corner, ready to swoop his ass up again. With nothing around him making him suspicious, he threw his gaze onto his building's entrance. He then limped up to his front door, pulled out his access card and let himself in. He got upstairs to his unit and walked in.

It hadn't even been a second before Maria came flying into the living room. She was armed with her cell phone in her hand. Derron literally walked in on her just as she just discovered Lexy in the bathroom. "MR. DERRON! LEXY IS DYING! SHE'S DYING!"

"What?!? What the fuck are you talking about, Maria?!?" Derron yelled. Despite pain overpowering every single square inch of his body, he mustered up enough energy to dash up to Maria. He grabbed her. "WHERE IS SHE?!? WHAT HAPPENED?!?!"

"YO NO SE! I DON'T KNOW! I JUST WALKED IN! I'M GONNA CALL THE AMBULANCE!" Maria exclaimed, tears flying out of her scared eyes. But within seconds, she registered Derron's fucked-up state and scanned him up and down asking, "MR. DERRON! What happened to you?!?"

"Don't worry about it!" he responded and quickly grabbed the phone out of Maria's hand. "Don't call the cops! Where is Lexy!"

"SHE'S IN THE BATHROOM!"

The two of them then rushed into the bathroom. Derron saw Lexy. "Is she breathing?!?" he asked.

"I think so! She has a pulse! MR. DERRON! GIMME MY PHONE! We need to call an ambulance!"

Derron ignored Maria as he was adamant about not wanting to call for an ambulance just yet. He leaned down and ran his fingertips across her neck. There was still a pulse. Then he listened for her breathing. She was breathing – but her breaths were distant and shallow. "She's still breathing! I'm gonna take her to the hospital!"

"WE SHOULD CALL AN AMBULANCE!" Maria screamed.

Derron shot up, grabbed Maria, and shoved her to the wall. "LISTEN, MARIA! I'm gonna give you $10,000! You need to leave ASAP and don't come back! EVER! Don't even come back to the gym!"

"MR. DERRON! LET ME GO! WHAT ARE YOU TALKING ABOUT?!?"

"MARIA! JUST LISTEN! Go in my closet and grab the black Nike duffle bag with the red stripes on it! There is probably $30,000 in there! I don't know! Just take the fucking cash and leave!"

The moment Derron let those huge digits slip out of his mouth, Maria's fretful scowl instantly transformed into a look of inquisitiveness. "Okay!" she replied and didn't hesitate in following Derron's instructions. She made her way into the closet, grabbed the bag and headed out without saying another word.

"FUCK! FUCK! FUCK!" Derron screamed slapping his temples as he hovered over Lexy. He glanced down at her and suddenly heard a gurgling sound come from her mouth. Blueish-green vomit then erupted from her cracking, bloodied lips. "COME ON, BRUH! Don't fucking die!" he yelled as he paced back and forth within the bathroom, quickly contemplating his next steps. "FUCK!" He knew what he needed to do now. *Get your shit and get the fuck out! Don't worry about this bitch! FUCK HER!*

"BOY! SEE, THERE YOU GO AGAIN! TAKE YO CLOTHES OFF AND SPREAD YO BOOTY OPEN!" That familiar, dark voice of Derron's father echoed from behind him.

Derron instantly spun on his feet and saw an apparition of his father. Half his head was blown off. "NOO! NOOOOO!" Derron screamed and then fell to his knees. Seeking immediate cover, he crawled over Lexy and then scurried to a corner inside of the bathroom. He threw his hands up to cover his face as the apparition of his father moved closer and closer to him. Derron was obviously having a massive hallucination but couldn't register that it was just that…a hallucination. He took his hands off his face and then opened an adjacent sink cabinet. He reached his hand in and grabbed for a gun he kept under the sink in case some shit popped off. Derron kept all types of guns and rifles hidden throughout the house and the bathroom sink cabinet was one of many locations.

He cocked the gloc and aimed it at his father's apparition.

POW! POW! POW! He let out shot after shot, thinking the bullets would pierce the ghost. "YOU NOT GON PUT YO HANDS ON ME NO MORE, MOTHAFUCKA!" he screamed. But the ghastly apparition faded away, unfazed by the bullets.

Nigga! You are tweakin'! Shit ain't real! Derron realized he was having an intense panic attack that made him hallucinate. For a split

second, he thought maybe the everything that happened over the last twenty-four hours was a hallucination, but it wasn't…He indeed witnessed two murders at the hand of a ruthless mob boss. He also got a close-up view of Adrianna's rotting corpse. Even gave her a kiss… this, too, thanks to Mr. Stan. And now he was crawled up next to Lexy as she lay in a puddle of vomit, slowly losing her life.

Derron stood up and then proceeded to pick Lacy up from off the bathroom floor. He slung her over his shoulders and then rushed into the living room and threw her on the couch. He looked into her face and slapped her cheeks from left and right rapidly, thinking the slaps would make her suddenly wake up. "Wake up, bitch! WAKE UP! WHAT THE FUCK DID YOU DO?!?"

Lexy was unresponsive.

"FUCK!" Derron slapped her again, but this time harder. He shot back into the bedroom and into the closet. There, he had a safe planted all the way in the back. He got the safe opened and emptied all the cash inside of it into a Prada travel bag he saw off to his side. He grabbed two other guns – a beretta and a .38 caliber – and dashed back into the living room.

He ran up to Lexy and looked at her, wondering if she was still breathing or if she had a heartbeat. He ran his fingertips against her neck. Both were still there…

"Think, think, think!" he growled. At this point, he figured there was nothing else he could do but just leave…and whatever happened to her…then oh well…That was life. She should've never messed with him in the first place. Would've never found herself in this predicament. Should've never got hooked to that shit in the first place. Slight guilty conscience began to set in, but that was quickly dissipated once he realized what was at stake. If he continued to stay for another second, he was setting himself up to get caught up. Maria could've easily called the cops although he told her not to. He didn't trust her, and he also knew her Roman Catholicism would kick in and make her feel sorry enough for Lexy to send an ambulance to the condo. So, for his farewell to the woman, he simply leaned down and said, "Sorry, Lexy. Shit got too real. Love you." He planted a kiss on her forehead and side of her face. He took off and left the condo, hoping Lexy would eventually succumb. Her death would keep all of their secrets just that – a secret.

Derron made his way outside and then dashed to an adjacent parking garage. Once he spotted his red Porsche, he hopped in, chucked the engine up and sped out like a hungry bat out of the deepest depths of hell. He had one last stop – that was the gym. He needed to empty out the safes there and then he was going to hit the road and make his way to the ATL.

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“Is everything okay, ma’am?”

Maria was staring out of a window inside of a Starbuck’s not too far away from Lexy’s condo when she heard a young white barista ask her if everything was okay.

The nervous maid, now slightly agitated, turned around and said, “Yes! Please, leave me alone!”

The barista pursed her lips and then said, “Oh, I’m sorry. I just—”

“Please!” Maria interrupted with her high-pitched growl. The barista turned around and walked back to the register, not wanting to further agitate the woman.

Maria continued to stand near the entrance of the cafe, staring out of a window, watching thick pedestrian traffic pass by. Each second that passed threw her more and more into a state of manic confusion. Guilt wracked every single neuron in her brain. She was shaking and biting her nails out of fear she was about to possibly make the right (or wrong) decision. *Pobrecita! She doesn’t deserve this!* Maria thought. She was debating whether or not she should just run back to the condo, call the police and get Ms. Lexy some help if she was still alive. Besides, Maria wasn’t a dumbass. The condo building was littered with cameras. If Lexy indeed did die and someone discovered her in the horrible state she was in, the police would dig deep and eventually see that Maria was there while Lexy was dying. And Derron, too. No, fuck that! Maria thought. She dashed out of the café and back to go get Ms. Lexy some help. She was going to spill the beans on everything…except the cash Mr. Derron had given her. That was reimbursement for fucking up her morning routine and putting her through this unexpected turmoil…

Chapter Twenty-Nine

Derron sped up to the entrance of the gym and threw the Porsche into park. With no time to spare, he quickly hopped out of the sports car and dashed inside the gym. Before he could even make it upstairs to his office, one of his trainers, some muscular ass white girl named Rhonda, saw him and screamed, "Derron! Where have you been, dude?!? We've been trying to call you all night and day!"

"Can't talk right now!" Derron yelled and shot her scowl. He quickly made his way upstairs to his office. Rhonda got a glance at him and saw how fucked up he looked. She just shrugged his shoulders and assumed maybe he got into a fight at a bar.

Once inside of his office, Derron went to work – looking to first empty out all of the safes inside of the office. He had one in a closet and another sitting off to the side. He knew both of them were filled with at least $50,000 each.

"Come on, come on, come on!" he muttered to himself as he tried to scramble to open up the first safe inside of his office.

Knock! Knock!

"GO AWAY!" he yelled and got the safe open but before he could look in and grab all the cash, the person who knocked said, "Derron, we need to talk! It's me, Kelsey!"

Derron suddenly stood attention. He paused for a moment and said, "No, man! I got shit to do! I'm on a conference call and then I gotta head out to the airport!"

"DERRON! Open the fucking door! It's important, dude!" Kelsey then tried to open the door but Derron had locked in when he dashed in earlier. "OPEN THE FUCKNG DOOR, MOTHERFUCKER! It's serious!"

"Kelsey! Just hit my line later! I got shit to do! I know you're mad about Jenn but I got it handled, okay?!?"

Derron looked down into the safe and saw it was completely empty. "The fuck?!?" his face instantly turned into a confused scowl.

"OPEN UP, ASSHOLE!" Kelsey was relentless with pounding on the door and his screams filled the outside hallway. Derron ignored him though – had to. Nigga was about to have a breakdown now that he

saw that the cash was gone. Why was the cash missing?!? Did someone rob him?!? His blood pressure was flying off the charts. “FUCK!”

Derron then dashed to the other safe inside the office closet. But the safe was missing…

“WHAT THE FUCK!?!?” He clasped the sides of his face; his eyes grew wide in terror. Someone got to him. Was it Mr. Stan? he wondered.

“DERRON! PLEASE! OPEN THE DOOR!” Kelsey cried.

“AHHHHHHHH!” Derron screamed and flipped his office desk over. He didn’t know what next move to make. He was trapped. Someone got to his shit…which meant someone had been watching him all along? Was this all one big set up? Was Jake and Erica in on everything and that was why Mr. Stan kidnapped and kill them?

Derron slumped the floor as Kelsey kept banging on the door and screaming.

Then all of a sudden, he heard these words that would forever change his life:

“FBI! EVERYONE GET DOWN NOW!”

Chapter Thirty

It was almost nine am…Despite it being somewhat chilly outside, sun rays peeked through Lacey's bedroom window's blinds.

She was just waking up. Usually a morning person, she would've had her ass up already, but she forgot to set her alarm clock last night after getting off the phone with Kobe. Besides, after getting laid off, she wasn't too fond of setting alarm clocks anymore. Apparently, alarm clocks fucked with your circadian rhythms. That was what she heard on some podcast the other day.

In a few hours she was scheduled to meet up with Kobe, and she woke up wondering how this "coffee date" was going to exactly go. She hadn't seen him virtually since college. And yeah, from pictures on social media, he still looked the same. Still was very much attractive. He didn't gain or lose a pound. Unlike so many people who they went to school with. Shit, half of their graduating class put on at least thirty or forty pounds since leaving school and getting boo'ed up. Marriage and kids will do that to you. Kobe though – he was still in possession of his unique, beaming smile that radiated confidence and self-assuredness. That was something Lacey always liked about the man. He always knew what he wanted out of life and pursued his dreams relentlessly. At times, she kind of wished she had the same zesty, fearless spirit. Even Lexy told her she needed to take risks at times. *Live life, girl! Shit, you only live once!*

Lacey still lay in her bed thinking, her eyes attached to the slowly moving ceiling fan. She couldn't quite just fathom why Kobe didn't have a spouse at the moment. But then again, he did travel the world and probably didn't have time for any semblance of a serious relationship. Maybe a friends-with-benefits here and there. But Kobe wasn't really that type…at least she assumed he wasn't. *Maybe he didn't want to get some poor woman's emotions caught up into fleeting love.* Yeah – she knew that feeling all too well. That fucking Ken… *Asshole*, she thought.

Lacey took a long yawn and rubbed the side of her head, regretful she smoked the two joints before she hit the sack. Nevertheless, once she got some coffee in her system, the weed-induced haziness would

hopefully go away. Needed to. After her little coffee date, she planned on running a million errands. Last thing she needed was the kush-induced mental fog bogging her down.

She spent the next few moments stretching out in her bed, hoping that would dither away some of the cloudiness. She took a deep breath, and within seconds, she drifted off as if she didn't have a damn worry in the world. Truthfully, she didn't…At least the moment. No real financial issues were lurking around the corner. Her severance check was on its way. Taking Lexy's advice, she was going to apply for unemployment on Monday. She was steadily applying for jobs and it was a matter of time before job prospects would start to hit her back for phone interviews.

Although she wasn't back to sleeping again, her eyes were closed and all she could think about was Kobe and all the memories they shared. Then it hit her – she realized it was past eight am. She was supposed to meet up with Derron at nine am for her personal training session.

"Shit!" she grumbled and darted upright in herbed. She didn't know what time it was, so she quickly reached over to her nightstand, yanked her cell phone off its charger and saw it was 9:02. "FUCK! He's gonna be so damn mad at me!"

She shot Derron a text, apologizing for being late. She would've easily threw on an outfit and headed to the gym, but by the time she got there, she knew Derron would've been either in a meeting or teaching a class.

But then she thought some more…She and Kobe were going to be meeting up at 10:30. Shaking her head, she didn't know why she didn't properly prepare for this anyways. She could've easily gone to the gym, worked out, showered there and then drove back to Bronzeville where the café was at.

She glanced down at her cell phone and saw 9:05 tick-tocking. Lacey now had less than an hour to scramble through her closet, find a nice outfit, shower and head up the street. Bronzeville was right around the corner. And then it hit her again – she remembered she never sent Kobe the name of the café. She pulled up his contact info, shot him a text of the location of the café and then dashed toward her bathroom. Once she showered and got ready, she made her way to Mama Pearl's Café on 35th street – the heart of Bronzeville, Chicago's *Harlem*.

~

Lacey walked through the doors of the small, jazzy café that was nestled right on the corner of 35th and State street. The café was one

of five black-owned and operated coffee houses in the Midwest. Lacey often came here when she wanted to work from home or when she wanted to just to chill and read a book.

She scanned the small crowd inside the café, thinking Kobe was already here but he wasn't. She then meandered over to the line so she could order a latte. Now that Fall was in season, Mama Pearl's was selling their world-renown pumpkin spice latte – an actual favorite of Lacey's. With Kobe not in sight yet, she continued to quietly stand in line. She was a tad nervous though. *I hope he didn't stand me up…*

"Lacey…Lacey Franklin?"

She instantly froze once she heard her name. The voice – although she hadn't heard it in a while –was still fresh and vivid. She turned around. It was Kobe…

Kobe was tall, slender and had the most glistening dark skin. Not a single flaw or imperfection was etched into his smooth dark brown skin. He had hazel eyes the stood out from a mile away. A well-manicured beard adorned his chiseled face. He'd remind you of a more mature Lance Gross plus ten pounds of muscle.

"Kobe!" she beamed and immediately went in to hug him. "Oh My God! It's been like…Over ten years!?!?"

"I know right!" he replied. The two hugged and then looked each other in the eyes. "Wow! You still look the same," Lacey commented. "You do, too!" Kobe replied with a smile, revealing his perfect white teeth.

"'Scuse me, but umm, ya'll gonna order something?" an older black gentleman from behind Kobe asked as he tapped him on his shoulder.

Kobe stepped out of the man's way and said, "Sorry, brotha. Go right ahead!"

"Thank you, young man," the elder replied and walked up to the register.

Kobe and Lacey stood off to the side. "You don't wanna get anything to drink?" Lacey asked.

"Nah, I'm not really a big coffee person. I get all of my energy from within," Kobe said laughing. "I take it you still love your morning coffee?"

"Of course!"

"So, how have you been?" Kobe asked.

"Same ole stuff. Nothing big…Other than looking for a job. It's rough out there, man," Lacey said as she shook her head. "I'll find something soon though. Not in a rush."

"Yeah, I feel you. Take your time. I'm sure you'll find something."

"Aww! Come on man! Ya'll ain't got the damn milk for the damn lattes! I hate black bitnessesses! Ya'll ain't never have shit, goddamn it!"

Both Kobe and Lacey looked at the black elder as he stood at the register, going off on the barista about the café not having any supplies to make his pumpkin spice latte. Lacey then looked at Kobe and said, “Damn, well, there goes my morning coffee.”

“Haha, you don’t like regular coffee?”

“Eww no. But it doesn’t matter. Let’s go and get a seat and talk.”

The two found a corner in the café and sat down.

“So when you did you come back?” Lacey asked.

“About three days ago.”

“Wow! So how was Ethiopia! I’ve always wanted to go there.”

“I love Ethiopia. The people. The food. Everything there is just awesome. They are the nicest people I’ve ever encountered.”

“That…is…amazing. Kobe, you’ve done so well for yourself. How does it feel to be a popular photographer? I mean, where *haven’t* you been?”

“Ahh, Lacey, stop it!”

“Stop what?”

“Hyping me up. I’m not *that* famous.”

“Oh, come on, Kobe! You’ve had your work in National Geographic, TIME and Ebony. Hell, if you ask me, you’ve accomplished more than most.”

“You have, too.”

“I guess,” Lacey responded shrugging her shoulders. She lowered her head out of shame. “But I got fired though.”

“So what?!? Plenty of people get fired. Besides, you’re probably smart enough to start your own business. That’s what I plan on doing.”

“Really?!? Here in Chicago?”

“Yeah. I already found the perfect loft space up in Evanston.”

“Damn…That sounds expensive!”

“Not really…I know some people.”

The two chopped it up for a few more minutes about work, politics, etc. Then Lacey had the inkling to ask something that had been plaguing her mind all night and morning. She cut straight to the chase. “Soooo…”

“Sooo…?” Kobe said raising his brow out of curiosity as to what Lacey was going to ask next. He kind of had an idea of where she was going just based on the tone of her voice.

“Where is she?”

Kobe snickered. “I knew that was coming…” He then said, “I told you last night I’m single. I’m not seeing nobody, period…”

Lacey laughed and said, “I don’t believe you. You’re too rich and famous to be single.”

“Oh, come on, Lacey. I’m dead serious. Shoot, if anything the

question is, 'where is *he?'*," he retorted grinning.

"Oh, YOU stop it! These guys out here are all the same."

"So, like, weren't you dating some Ken guy? Or engaged to him, I think? Sorry – I am a social media sleuth sometimes…"

Lacey suddenly tightened her lips and fell silent. She looked off to the side, staring at nothing in particular. Then she said, "Well…I, umm…"

"Oh, damn, I'm sorry," Kobe suddenly interjected. "I didn't mean to ask it like that." Kobe sensed her slight embarrassment about discussing that particular situation.

"It's cool," Lacey said. "Yeaahhhhhh. We didn't work out. He was an asshole anyways. He even had the fucking nerve to invite me to his wedding."

"What?!? Are you kidding me? That's fucked up. That is some asshole shit," Kobe said shaking his head. He looked around for a few seconds and then said, "Man, it's kind of stiff in here, no disrespect. I think we should bounce and go somewhere else."

"Like where?"

"Shit, I don't know…You wanna go for a walk on the Lake?"

Lacey thought for a moment. The lake was literally right down the street and it wasn't too cool outside for them not to take a casual walk. The lakefront trail was a popular destination for Chicagoans to go bike, run or take long, meditative walks. "I guess…It's not too windy anyways."

The two of them got up, left the café and walked down 35th street to the trail.

~

Two hours had passed, and the two friends had made their way back to Mama Pearl's.

"Wheew! Damn, that was a long ass walk! I swear!" Kobe laughed.

"I know right! But it was fun though! I hadn't walked it in a while!"

"Yeah…It was fun." Kobe commented, "You know…You're still the same ole Lacey"

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"Bubbly. Creative."

Lacey blushed and smiled. "Thank you."

"Thanks for meeting up with me though. I really appreciate it."

"Same here, Kobe…It was nice seeing you again. If you ever wanna link up again and pick my brain about marketing, just give me a ring…"

"Oh, I will…" Kobe smiled and stretched his arms out. Lacey went

in and the two hugged. The two then split and started to walk toward their cars in separate directions. Kobe hadn't walked no more than twenty feet before he stopped dead in his tracks, turned around and yelled, "Lacey! Hold up! Come back…"

Lacey turned around. "Wassup? You forgot something?"

He walked up to her and then looked her in her eyes. "You know, I'm not gonna lie. I missed you. We had something…"

Lacey froze. A million butterflies suddenly swarmed her insides. "What do you mean?"

"You and I. We had something. I feel like we still *have* something."

Lacey didn't know what to say. But deep down she knew Kobe was right; she couldn't just let the truth roll off her tongue. She wanted Kobe to say it. He grabbed her and said, "I'm single because I never stopped thinking about you. This may seem weird but I actually still love you."

Lacey's eyes amplified out apprehension but her heart melted. She gulped. She loved him still, too. She just buried her lost love deep in the trenches of her broken heart, imagining that one day someone *like* him would come into her life. But someone *like* him wasn't standing before her – it *was* him. And here he was, wanting her back like as if they were still on Howard's campus, snuggled up on each other, talking about life.

"Wow. This is…I just don't know what to say," Lacey responded.

Kobe lowered his head and said, "Look, I'm sorry. I just…I know this is strange."

"Kobe…I really never got over you either. I still love you, too," she confessed. The two stood there for a few seconds and then the magical moment happened: Kobe leaned in and the two locked their lips together. "Wait…What are we doing? Like what am I doing?!? You just came back into town!"

"Ms. Timid. Just let go…Stop being scared," Kobe said.

Lacey paused and pondered Kobe's statement. He was right. She needed to let go. The right opportunity was right before her and here she was potentially talking herself out of it.

"You're right!" she said grabbing him. The two made out in the parking lot like two immature highschoolers. "Let's get out of here. Let's just spend the day together," Kobe said.

"I have so much to do."

"Fuck that shit. I do, too."

"You're right."

Lacey's phone buzzed. She pulled it out and was just about to answer a phone call from an unknown number. "Wait, I think this a job calling me."

Kobe grabbed the phone out of Lacey's hand, rejected the phone

call and then turned the phone off. “Let’s pretend like it’s the year 2003 all over again and we didn’t have cell phones.”

Lacey gasped and clutched her mouth out of surprise that Kobe would be so brazen. But he was right. *Stop stressing, girl. You know you want this…Everything else can wait.*

“You’re right. Let’s bounce. So, where are we going?” Lacey asked with high excitement in her tone.

“Shit, I don’t know. Let’s just be adventurous.”

“Sounds like a plan to me.”

Lacey and Kobe hopped in his rental Malibu and took off.

Chapter Thirty-One

The tangerines and purples that once colored the sky's fading sunset disappeared into complete darkness as night set in. Nonstop gusts of cold air rolled off the choppy, icy waters of Lake Michigan, dropping the temperature to the mid-fifties. This was typical Chi-town weather for the start of October. Before you know it, heavy snowfall and sub-zero digits were trekking right around the corner. Lacey hoped the city would be blessed with a blazing Indian Summer where warm temps would last into mid-Fall. However, it seemed tonight she could officially not count on that blessing coming her way.

"Damn, it's getting pretty chilly outside," Lacey groaned gripping herself to generate some semblance of warmth for her body. She had on a blue jean jacket, but it's thickness apparently wasn't doing shit to protect her from the vicious winds cloaking her now muscular frame (thanks to Mr. Derron).

She and Kobe just finished eating dinner at *Ras Dashen*, a well-known Ethiopian eatery located in the crowded bustle of Chicago's North Side.

It was nearly nine pm. Lacey and her new boo were casually strolling down the somewhat pedestrian-busy sidewalk of Broadway avenue. They were chit-chatting and holding hands, and by the expressions on their faces you would've swore wedding bells were sounding off from afar.

Truthfully, it wouldn't be surprising either if the two eloped. Both of them weren't really thrilled about ever having a big wedding. Although they weren't moving *that* quickly, the two had talked briefly about their desires and preferences to have a small, intimate destination wedding over a traditional one.

Kobe was already missing the aridness of the Ethiopian desert. He lived there for two years. But now that he had been back in Chicago for less than a week, he wondered if he made the right decision. But obviously he did – Lacey was all the reason for him to stay put…at least for now.

"Yeah, damn…Seems like my ass chose the wrong time to move," Kobe replied lightly shaking his head, revealing a degree of agitation

with the wind. The gusts were damn near knocking him to his knees. “Should’ve came a month or two earlier. I missed those Chicago summers.”

“I know right…We did have an awesome summer this year, too,” Lacey laughingly replied. She was a bit annoyed, too, but she was a life-long Chicagoan and was used to erratic weather. “You know… Now that I think about it – remember that time we went to the Taste and you almost got into a fight with those crazy kids from Chinatown?” Lacey asked chuckling. She was referring to the *Taste of Chicago*, a yearly food festival held in the heart of Downtown. Everyone from all over the Chicago metro area flooded the festival to get a taste of the best of Chi-town’s local cuisine.

“Hahaha! WOOW! I forgot all about that,” Kobe laughed. His annoyance quickly disappeared when he thought of the crazy memory Lacey just mentioned. “Man, you remember everything!”

A devious grin came over her face as she leaned in and whispered, “I even remember that night you also had to pee in a cup…”

“Ok, stop it!” Kobe blushed out of embarrassment. “Now you’re going too far,” he playfully said and nudged her in her shoulder. He stopped and pulled her into his embrace. “But guess what?”

“What?”

“I also remember the time we took our first kiss…At Navy Pier. I remember like it was yesterday.”

“Really?” Lacey grinned.

“Yeah…” Kobe licked his lips and then bit them. “Just like it was yesterday.” Kobe reached in and locked his long, succulent lips onto Lacey’s. Without caring that they were in the middle of slightly heavy sidewalk traffic, the two made out passionately. Kobe’s consideration for others kicked in, so he slowly moved the two of them out of peoples’ way and off to the side near a light pole. They then spent the next few minutes or so enraptured in one another. After they casually ended their random kissing session, they sauntered down the street until they arrived at a hole-in-the-wall, old-fashioned ice cream parlor.

“We haven’t been here in ages!” Kobe exclaimed. “I can’t believe this place is still around!” He gawked at the old signage that read, “VALENTINO’S”. Lacey and Kobe would often frequent this place when they were in high school. Crazy enough, Lexy said she used to come here, too, as a teenager. Crazy they never ran into each other.

The *new* couple walked inside the parlor and stood in the long line. And just like how it was when they were teenagers, a million loud, hormone-enraged teens filled the notorious neighborhood shop with their nonstop laughs, giggles, and shouts.

Kobe scanned the menu figuring out what he was going to order. Lacey already knew what she was going to get though. Apple Pie A La

Mode with extra caramel sauce. From the looks of slow-moving line, Lacey presumed they had some time to spare before it was their turn to order their dessert. She pulled out her cell phone to check to see if she had any missed messages, voicemails or e-mails. Kobe was adamant they don't spend time on their phones while enjoying themselves. He told Lacey earlier he was on a social media and cellphone fast and was encouraging others to do the same to reclaim a sense of what life was like "P.C." – pre-cell phone.

She was down for the cause, but she didn't want people worried about her whereabouts. She turned on her smartphone, and within seconds, she was slammed with a barrage of text messages from her mother that made her gasp and clutch her chest.

Mom: Lacey! Where are you?!? Why aren't you picking up your phone? Lexy is in the hospital.

She might not make it! You need to get down here ASAP! CALL ME NOW!

Mom: Lacey! PLEASE PICK UP YOUR PHONE! LEXY IS DYING! GET TO UCHICAGO

HOSPITAL NOW!

"Oh My God! OH MY GOD!" Lacey yelled inside the parlor. All the raucous inside the ice cream shop came to a halt and everybody's eyes suddenly glued to Lacey. Kobe spun around and asked," What happened?!?"

She was flustered and overrun with emotion. "We have to go! We gotta go NOW! Lexy is in the hospital! OH MY GOD! SHE'S DYING! We have to leave!"

"Wait! What's wrong, Lacey?!? What do you mean!?!?"

"WE HAVE TO GO NOW!" she screamed at the top of her lungs as tears flooded her face, instantly ruining her make up. She stormed out of the parlor. Kobe chased after her. "Lacey! Stop! Hold up!" he bellowed as he tried to catch up with her. She was running down the sidewalk, hitting and shoving a few bystanders in the process. Kobe managed to catch up to her. "Lacey! Please, slow down! You're gonna hurt yourself!"

"WE GOTTA GET TO THE HOSPITAL, KOBE!!! LEXY IS DYING! I DON'T KNOW WHAT'S WRONG!"

"Okay! Let's go! Let me take you! I'm here for you!"

"Okay! Please! Just whatever!"

"Fuck! My car is parked far away!" Kobe realized his rental was parked at least five blocks down from where they were currently at. "Let's just get a Lyft!" he said whipping out his phone. He quickly ordered a ride off the Lyft app.

"Okkkay," Lacey cried. The world seemed to be collapsing in on her and by this point, she didn't have the strength to stand on her own

two feet. She slumped down and bawled. People passing by gave them awkward stares but kept walking on, obviously minding their own damn business.

Within less than a minute, their Lyft ride arrived in a blue Corolla. The two of them hopped in. Kobe lunged at the driver and yelled, “Hey, man! No disrespect, but we need to get to the hospital ASAP!” Hearing the urgency in Kobe’s voice, the driver mumbled back in his thick foreign accent, “Gotcha!”. The car sped off. Within twenty minutes, they were back in Hyde Park.

~

Lacey and Kobe hopped out of the Corolla and stormed the double door entrance of the emergency room. They rushed the receptionists’ desk. Lacey gawked at an older white woman behind the counter and said, “I’m here to see a friend who just got admitted! I just got a call that she was currently in the ICU!”

“What’s her name, ma’am?”

“Alexandria Scott!”

The white woman quickly looked up Lexy’s patient info and then shot Lacey a strange look. “She’s, umm, she’s on the seventh floor. Room 7201. You, umm. Nevermind…Just take a right and the elevators are there, sweetheart,” the receptionist uttered with caution laced in her tone.

“Thank you so much!” Lacey replied, tears still streaming down her face. She and Kobe rushed up to the seventh floor and made their way to the ICU. Before she could even make it to Lacey’s room, Lacey saw several police officers standing outside of the room standing guard. Lacey then saw her mother and stepfather standing off to the side. Lacey’s parents and a few of her siblings were there as well. Not a single face was free of emotion. Everyone had expressions of grief, disappointment, darkness and agony painted deep and wide into their faces.

“Mom! What’s going on?!?! Why are all of these cops here!?!? Is she okay?!?” Lacey cried as she fell into her mother’s embrace. Her mother didn’t say a word. She just kept her lips locked and then she looked over at Lacey’s mother and father. Lacey threw them a gaze wondering why her mother looked over at them. Lacey saw both of their faces were reddened. Their eyes sunken and teary. She glanced back at her mother and asked, “What in the hell is going on?!? Is Lexy okay?”

“Yes…She’s stable now. Everything is okay. We umm…I think it’s important for you to hear what happened from her parents,” her mother said in a low tone and then looked back at Lexy’s parents.

Kobe felt a bit uncomfortable with the situation and decided to walk away out of respect for everyone's privacy. He also had an *urgent* phone call he needed to make. "I'll leave for right now, Lacey," he said. "Okay, thank you," she said back. "Nice seeing you again, Mrs. Franklin," Kobe smiled and walked down the corridor to find the visitor's area.

"Please, God, let everything be okay!" Lacey said as she went in to hug her mother again. Before she was about to walk over to Lexy's parents, she turned around and tried to peer through the thick crowd of officers surrounding the entrance of Lexy's room. She could make out what had to have been bestie lying motionless in a bed. *Oh my God, Lexy! What did you do?!? Please, girl! Don't do this to me! Please, God, do not let her die,* she prayed. She walked over toward Lexy's parents. "Mr. Scott! What happened?!?"

Mr. Scott held his wife tight and massaged her shoulders back and forth, doing his best to console the grieving mother. Mrs. Scott was more visibly distraught than anyone else. Her head was sunk to her chest. From the looks of it, she didn't have the energy to even acknowledge Lacey's presence. Mr. Scott cleared his throat and said, "She did something really bad to herself, Lacey…."

"What happened?"

Mr. Scott closed his eyes and shook his head. "She overdosed on cocaine and pain killers. Doctors had to resuscitate her almost five times. She's stable now but doctors don't know if she has brain damage. They are running some tests now but they said it doesn't look too good."

Lacey gasped. "What?!?" she yelled, instantly catching the attention of the police officers standing guard. But she wasn't the only one who had a sudden, visceral reaction to the father's melancholic statement. Hearing those gloomy words seemed to have triggered Mrs. Scott into instant sobbing. Tears flew out of her reddened, puffy eyes. "My baby, my baby!" she moaned in a roar and shook her head like she was having a seizure. The mother buried face into her own palms and kept sobbing and shaking her head.

Lacey's eyes were now amplified out of shock and fear. *What the fuck?!?* That was what she kept thinking as Mr. Scott's words replayed in her mind. She clasped her mouth, trying her best to contain her urge to scream.

Mrs. Scott's moans became more and more intense. Lacey looked at the woman, noticing how she was a more mature replica of her poor Lexy. They resembled each other in every way. Hearing Mr. Scott let the cat out of the bag was just too much for the mother to bear obviously. She never imagined her debutante, AKA-pledging daughter would turn out to be a coke addict who almost lost her life – and for

reasons yet to be known. “I gotta go! This just too much. Too fucking much! I don’t believe this girl would do this to me!” Mrs. Scott roared. “Belinda! Come on now!” Mr. Scott said, still trying his best to mitigate his wife’s anguish.

“No, Howard! I gotta sit down somewhere and just think about all of this bullshit!” She wasn’t budging. She threw her husband’s arms off her shoulders and stormed off crying and cursing.

Mr. Scott stood there perplexed for a second and then turned his attention back to Lacey. “I’m sorry…She’s just still trying to process everything.”

“Mr. Scott! What do you mean she had a drug overdose?!? LEXY?!? I’ve never seen her not even smoke a damn joint in her life?!?! This can’t be real!”

“Lacey…Look, we are all shocked by all of this. We really don’t have idea what is really going on! The cops are all over the place! We haven’t even been able to go in her room. They won’t even tell us why they are keeping her guarded!”

Lacy threw a gaze back at the ten or so Chicago PD uniformed officers. They were all mostly engaged in light conversation. One of them threw her weird frown and then turned his gaze back to one of his brothers in blue. Lacey looked back at Mr. Scott. “This is just…so weird! Like, I am so confused right now!” she exclaimed.

“Lacey…Now you know I’ve been knowing you for a long time. And I hope you know that I also love you like a daughter. You and Lexy are super-close.” The concerned father paused for a moment and bit his lips. He seemed very hesitant. Lacey could tell by his cautious tone that he had something on his mind that he had to get off. “Listen – you can be completely honest with me. I swear to God I won’t tell a soul. We all make mistakes…”

“Mr. Scott…What are you trying to ask?”

“So, you never knew that Lexy was into this mess?”

“No…” Lacey raised her hands in surrender and slowly shook her head. “I swear to God, Mr. Scott, I have no idea what any of this is about. I smoke a bag of weed maybe like once or twice a month. That’s probably the riskiest thing I’ve ever done in my life! And Lexy wouldn’t even try it with me when I offered!”

Mr. Scott’s eyes’ closed and became sorrowfully silent. “I believe you…” All of a sudden, the father broke down into tears.

“I’m so sorry, Mr. Scott,” Lacey sobbed and wrapped her arms around the weeping elder as he sunk to the cold hospital floor. “I wish I would’ve known something. I never saw her do this in front of me! Like, I am really confused right now! I had no idea!”

“Are you her friend?” an unfamiliar older male voice asked from behind Lacey. She turned around and stood back up.

“Yes…” She threw the older black man a befuddled scowl.

“Hi, I’m Detective Bivens with the Sex Crimes Division of the Chicago Police Department…Can I have a word with you in private?”

“Sure…” Lacey’s confusion grew by a million. The detective took her to a corner that was free of anyone.

“Sorry you have to see all of this.”

“Detective, I am so confused right now. I had no idea she was doing this! Like, this is just not her! Like this has to be a big mistake.”

“Do you know her boyfriend?”

“Boyfriend…? She doesn’t have a boyfriend.”

The detective’s eyebrow raised and he pursed his lips. “Are you really her *friend*-friend? Or just like a casual associate or something?”

“Ummm…I’m her *BEST* friend, Detective.”

“So you never knew she has a boyfriend?”

“NO! I would’ve known.”

“So, you don’t know Derron?”

Lacey froze for a moment. “Excuse me? Derron?”

“Yes…Derron. Derron Harrington. He’s actually in custody as we speak.”

“WAIT! WHAT?!?!?”

Chapter Thirty-Two

"Yes…So you *do* know him?" Detective Bivens winced and pulled out a notepad and pen.

"Uhh! Yes! He is or *was* my personal trainer! What the fuck?!?" Lacey quickly remembered she was in a hospital, more importantly, an ICU. And obviously, ICUs had strict noise rules. "I'm sorry," she then uttered in a low, apologetic tone. Her head was pounding. An abysmal migraine almost had her ready to pass the fuck out. "I just don't understand! I mean…we JUST met Derron a few weeks ago! What do you mean that is her boyfriend?!? What in the hell are you talking about, sir?!?" she exclaimed but her tone again was low and cautious.

"Listen…I don't know what you know about your so-called friend, but I'm telling you…I literally just interviewed her and this Mr. Harrington last night. I don't know if you've been watching the news, but Mr. Harrington's gym was raided by the FBI this morning. Damn, it was all over WGN and ABC7. Do you live under a rock?"

Lacey grew silent. A vicious scowl came across her face. "Derron!?!? Derron Harrington?!? Owner of BeastCORE studios-Derron Harrington?!?"

"Yes!" The detective threw Lacey a gawk displaying his sudden annoyance with her. Sensing that Lacey still wasn't believing anything he had to say, he pulled out some polaroid pictures from his jacket pocket. They were pics an investigator took last night while Lexy was in the hospital. He handed them over to Lacey. "And according to your friend, well, *he* is her boyfriend. They were just at Northwestern Hospital last night because she claimed she was mugged by some guys out in Roseland. These are some pictures we took last night."

"HUH?!? WHAT?!?" Lacey clasped her mouth as she examined the photos. They were really Lexy. Her incessant denial and disbelief were brought to heel and sudden rage filled every fiber in her body.

"I'm sorry this all seems like news," the detective uttered and took a few notes.

"But I was supposed to go out with Derron! This isn't making any sense."

Detective Bivens shrugged his shoulders. “I don’t know what to tell you.”

“Okay, so why are all of these cops here?!? Did he try to kill her?!?”

“Ehhh…She’s in some legal trouble. Really big trouble.”

“Why?!?”

“Listen, I don’t have time for the bullshit. I seriously suggest you come clean or confess whatever you know. You might be getting hit up soon by the Feds. They are here, too, just FYI.”

“Sir, listen, I have no idea what the fuck is really going on right now! Like, I am thoroughly confused. This is just too much! I just literally came back from a date! This isn’t just like Lexy at all! This is not right! I just don’t know what to believe!”

“Ma’am…I am just telling you what’s going on and I thought you would’ve known something about last night. The story turned out to be bullshit anyways. Again, I hate to be the bearer of bad news, but we are pressing charges against Mr. Harrington for domestic battery and possible violent sexual assault. We are unfortunately going to be pressing charges against your…*friend*…for obstruction of justice and filing a false police report.”

Lacey stood there perplexed once again. Nothing was registering. Cocaine overdose. Lexy and Derron were together last night. But she and Derron were supposed to go out. FBI raid on the gym. Derron’s in jail. Now Derron is being charged with domestic battery. Lexy was going to be hit up with charges as well. None of this shit was adding up. The facts weren’t aligning with what she knew about her best friend. Lexy hadn’t even been really displaying any type of erratic behavior lately. Didn’t even have that stereotypical edgy, constantly sniffing cokefiend look or vibe.

Hard-hitting fact after fact had a stranglehold over Lexy. She didn’t know what else to say or do. “Is that all, sir?

“I guess for right now…if I have any more questions we’ll be in contact. Thanks…” The detective reached out to shake Lacey’s. She wasn’t in the mood of being cordial, so she just walked off in silence, tears fell from her face.

She walked back over to her parents. “I can’t stay here…I gotta go,” Lacey said to her mother.

“What’s wrong?”

“Everything. Everything’s wrong. Lexy has been lying to me this whole entire time.”

“What are you talking about.”

“Come on, ma. Let’s go. We’ll talk about it. Do you know where Kobe is?”

“He’s over in the visitor’s area I believe.”

Lacey and her parents went to the visitor's area to go meet up with Kobe. There, Lacey revealed to her parents and Kobe the shocking revelations Detective Bivens dropped on her. Everyone was completely shocked and couldn't believe Lexy was out here living raw and dangerously. And not a single soul knew had an inkling as to what was going on…

~

Metropolitan Correctional Center, better known as MCC, was Chicago's federal jail housed in the crowded center of the Loop (or Downtown). The massive fortress housed thousands of men and women who were anxiously awaiting trial.

Many who came through here were adamant about their innocence. They'd claim all day long they were either set up, framed or the feds simply nabbed the wrong person. But the hard reality was that virtually all of whom were imprisoned here were guilty beyond reasonable doubt of what they were accused of by the Feds. Unlike the local police and prosecutors, the Feds didn't go after people on mere hearsay or scant evidence. The Feds were like hungry hawks looking for potential prey in a barren desert. They watched you from afar for weeks, months and even sometimes years. They knew every single movement you took. Knew every single dollar you spent. Every single dick you sucked. Every single pussy you fucked. How? These ruthless, federal law enforcement functionaries used every single resource at their disposal to build a solid case against your ass.

Derron, among many others, stood in a long line waiting to get served breakfast. It was nearly eight AM the following morning. Since getting locked up, Derron couldn't sleep and the man barely had an appetite. Nonetheless, according to the center's protocol, every single inmate had to make their way to the cafeteria promptly at eight am. It was standard security precaution.

"Man, breakfast smell good as fuck, fam!" a young black prisoner barked behind Derron as they stood idle in the long line. Derron had been in line for at least twenty minutes now and he still was several feet away from the first server. Derron didn't say anything back to the young brotha. He ignored the man and kept his mind concentrated on what the fuck just happened over the last twenty-four hours. Shit was a horrible roller coaster ride.

He spent the night replaying every single thing in his head and by now, he was ready to figure out how he was going to get himself out of this bind. All he knew at this point was that the feds were charging him with an array of charges: racketeering, tax evasion, conspiracy to traffic narcotics across state lines, etc. Just a cursory understanding of

the law had Derron assuming that if the Feds were successful in their prosecution, he was looking at serving at least forty to fifty years in prison. Although he was scared shitless, he was trying his best to maintain his composure and display strength.

He'd already made a call to an attorney and was scheduled later this afternoon to consult with him. He tried calling Kelsey several times but he had no luck getting into contact with the man. He even tried to contact Jenn. Again, no luck. He didn't know whether or not Lexy was dead or alive, but there was no use in trying to find out. She was useless to him by this point anyways. Right now, he needed to put all of his effort and focus into getting out of here as soon as possible… At least bond out.

"Man, bruh, you gon eat yo sausage when you get up there?" the young prisoner asked Derron again. He tapped him on Derron's shoulder to get his attention and just as he was about to ask Derron again, Derron quickly turned around and slapped the guy's hand. "Ay, man, don't fucking touch me."

"Damn! Sorry, bruh! I just want—"

"I don't give a fuck what you want. And no, I ain't this nasty as shit," Derron growled.

"Aiight, bruh. It ain't that serious. Damn…"

Derron turned back around and threw his gaze back onto the slowly-moving line that by now had only made an inch in progress.

Some more minutes passed and a corrections officer made his way down the line, scanning all of the prisoners to ensure they were on their best behavior. He was tall, built and looked like a former defensive lineman for the Chicago Bears. He was bald and had the biggest black beard wrapped around his thick, wide face. His eyes were wide and unblinking. Menacing couldn't even describe the intimidating guard's presence. He continued walking the aisle and stopped once he reached Derron. He stood there for a few seconds and scanned Derron up and down.

"Man, you look familiar…"

Derron noticed the guard had stopped and was ogling him with such weird intensity. He slowly turned his glance toward the guard and replied with, "I know you?"

"Yeah, you look familiar as fuck. What's your name?"

"Derron."

"Derron, Derron, Derron. Where the fuck do I know you from?"

"I don't know…" Derron threw his gaze back to the line. He assumed maybe the man saw him on local television or read about him in the newspapers. Derron wasn't necessarily a full-on celebrity, but he was well-known throughout the city since BeastCORE was featured in many news outlets and cities.

“Hrrrm,” the guard groaned and tightened his lips. He took another scan of Derron then walked off.

~

Officer Jackson walked out of the cafeteria and made his way back to the breakroom on the fifth floor.

“Sup, Lieutenant Jackson,” another officer – an older white man – said as the burly guard made his way into the officer’s lounge.

“Not a damn thing, Crowley. You still tryna get yo old, small, pink dick sucked tonight?” Lieutenant Jackson asked.

“Oh, fuck you!” Officer Crowley roared playfully. “But yeah. She’s still gonna hit me up, right?” the horny, older Caucasian jail guard asked in a somewhat creepy manner. He flashed a devilish grin and licked his lips.

“Yeah. I’mma about to call the club right now to check on that for you. But in the meantime, run me my fucking money,” Lieutenant Jackson said with his open hand extended out to Officer Crowley.

“I gotta pay first?!?” Crowley complained looking down at Lieutenant Jackson’s huge hand.

“Hell fuckin’ yeah! The fuck?!?”

“Fine!” The horny white officer pulled out his wallet and counted aloud out $300 in cash. He slapped the moulah into Lieutenant Jackson’s hand. Lieutenant Jackson proceeded the count the cash.

“You don’t trust me or somethin?!? I just counted the fucking money in front of you.”

Lieutenant Jackson paused for a moment. “Run me another hundred for talking shit.”

“What?!? No! Now that’s extortion. I’m just better off fucking my wife if that’s the case!”

“Two hundred now!”

“FINE! Fuck it!” the officer growled out of frustration. “This bitch better be worth it!”

“It will…Now get the fuck out of my face. I got a call to make.”

“Asshole. You lucky I like your black ass!” Officer Crowley laughed shaking his head as he walked off.

Lieutenant Jackson pulled out his cell phone and pulled up the name “NuNu” in his contacts. He dialed the number and waited for someone to pick up as he stood off to the side.

“Wassup, Smoke?” A woman’s raspy voice answered on the other line.

“Shit. Hustling. ‘Memba I told you about this pussaz cracka who was looking to hook up with one of ya girls from the club?”

“Yeah. He still on?”

“Yeah…I got the money too. All two-hunned.”

“Good! Her ass so stupid, too. She doing this shit just for some stamps. Pathetic ass bitch.”

“Hey, stop it! Lil mama gotta do what she gotta do…” Lieutenant Jackson then said, “But look. Check this shit out…Didn’t you use to mess with some nigga way back when? Like some dude named Derrick or Derron? The nigga who beat the shit out of your sister and then went missing and we couldn’t find his ass?”

“Yeah…Why? Wassup? He dead or something…”

“Nah. I think that nigga got locked up. I just saw his ass a few minutes ago.”

“Wait?!? You sure that’s him?”

“Yeah. That gotta be that nigga.”

Chapter Thirty-Three

"Alexandria…Alexandria, can you hear me?" Dr. Raja, the chief neurologist at UChicago Hospital, waved a small, pencil-sized flashlight across Lexy's eyelids. Within seconds, she slowly opened her eyes and stared at the man through her hazy vision. Tubes pumping a combination of oxygen and medications were in her nostrils.

She had been placed in a medically induced coma and now doctors were trying to figure out if she suffered from any permanent brain damage. Luckily, no serious damaged had been inflicted upon her brain. Dr. Raja told her parents earlier that she was expected to make a full, one-hundred percent recovery.

Lexy gazed the room and as her sight became clearer, she saw her parents, her brother and sister, along with an army of Chicago police officers inside of the room. She glanced over to her left and then tried to lift her arms. She couldn't. Her hands were handcuffed to the rails of the bed. Her confinement to the bed suddenly jolted her into anxiety.

"What's going on?!?" she muttered through her dry mouth.

"You were in a coma, Lacey," Dr. Raja explained. "Can you see and hear everything I am saying?"

"Ye-yeah," she mumbled. She was a tad nauseous and the sides of her head were throbbing. Her eyesight still a tad hazy although she could clearly see and understand the palpable gravity of her situation by the looks on everyone's faces inside of the room.

Dr. Raja continued to ask several questions all while Lexy could discern that her parents now knew the truth of what happened. Although a mélange of pain killers, sedatives and other medications were running through her, numbing her bodily pain away, nothing could mitigate the look of disappointment her parents projected onto her.

"What is wrong?" she asked, somewhat slurring her words.

A middle-aged white man with a buzz cut and dressed in typical Fed uniform (a black suit, white shirt and tie), strolled over to the bed. "Alexandria, I'm Agent O'Reilly with the FBI."

Lexy gulped and closed her eyes for a second. *Am I dreaming?* she

thought.

"Yes…"

"I have to officially read you your Miranda rights."

"I can't believe this shit! I can't!" Mrs. Scott groaned out in the room and started crying uncontrollably. "Marvin, go take your mama outside," Mr. Scott said to his son – Lexy's younger brother. Doing what he was told, he along with his fraternal twin sister, escorted Mrs. Scott outside of the room. Mr. Scott stayed put and went over to a corner to sit down.

"I don't…I don't understand!" Lexy cried. "What did I do?"

"I'll explain after I read your rights. I have to do this by law…" Agent O'Reilly continued, "You have the right to remain silent. Anything that you say can be used against you in a court of law…"

After he finished reading her Miranda rights, the Agent pulled up a chair close to the bed. He sat down, then turned in his chair and said, "I am going to have to ask everyone to please exit the room. Even you, Mr. Scott."

"Okay," the father said as he shot up from his seat and slowly walked near the bed, gazing at Lexy.

Lexy could see through the heavy look in her father's eyes that he was disgusted.

"Daddy," she cried and grimaced. "I didn't do anything wrong."

He shook his head and looked the other way then made his way out of the room. The officers exited the room as well. Agent O'Reilly then looked back at Lexy and said, "Now is the time to tell me everything you know about Derron. You are facing some serious trouble if you don't come clean."

"I did-dddiddidn't do anything, I swear," she stuttered, trying to quickly gather her words.

"Alexandria, look, we can work something out with the prosecutors. But trust and believe me, they are very aggressive. They aren't playing not a single game. So, please, tell me everything you know about Derron."

Lexy closed her eyes. A few tears trickled their corners. "Okay… Derron got into a serious financial bind and apparently he started working for the Russian mafia. That is what I know. He was getting the drugs from them as well and was selling them in order to pay off a debt. But he couldn't make enough money…so that's when he asked me if I could…"

"Could what?"

"Help him hack my best friend's bank and 401k accounts."

Agent O'Reilly raised a brow out of suspicion. "So, he wanted you to help him figure out a way how to get access to her accounts? Why her?"

“Well, I had made the recommendation.”

“So, it was your idea? You were going to help him steal money from your own best friend.”

Lexy shrugged her shoulders. “I got too caught up. I…I let myself go.” She tried to lift her hand again to wipe her face free of tears but quickly realized again her hands were confined to the rails of the bed. She then uttered, “I guess cocaine will do that to you.”

“Wow,” the agent replied shaking his head out of antipathy. He stood up from the seat and made his way out of the room. Lexy sat in the room by her lonesome until some minutes later, her dad was able to come in.

He couldn’t give her eye contact. He just meandered back over to a corner and sunk his face down into his lap, trying his best to conjure up the right words to say.

“Daddy, please, I swear I didn’t mean to do all of this…”

“Lexy…What in FUCK got into your head? Do you know you could’ve died?!?”

“I know, I know!” she cried. Mr. Scott got up from his seat and sat in the chair next to her bed. “If you had all of this going on, why didn’t you tell us?”

“I didn’t think things would go this far, Daddy.”

“When did you start using drugs?!?”

“Two…two years ago,” she confessed. “I didn’t think I would get to this point.”

Mr. Scott didn’t say a word. He just sat there, staring at her, shaking his head. Then he got up and made his way back to the door. “Baby girl, I love you, but you’re gonna have to fight this battle alone. Your mother and I don’t want to have anything to do with you after this point.” Suddenly Mr. Scott’s face squeezed tight as he tried to fight back tears. He said, “We can’t trust you anymore. You are not our daughter. We don’t know who you are. Good luck with everything.” Mr. Scott proceeded to walk out of the door.

“Daddy, no!” Lexy cried, hoping her loud, anguished sob would stop her father from abandoning her. But he kept walking on, not turning his back.

Moments later, officers flooded her room. Then a few nurses strolled in. “We’re gonna be transferring you to the hospital at MCC,” one of the officers barked.

“What’s that?” Lexy asked.

“Metropolitan Correctional Center.”

Chapter Thirty-Four

Lexy's nasty truth – well some of it – was now out the bag. Since she overdosed and was eventually arrested and sent to jail, everyone she knew was beginning to learn of her dark secrets. Her cocaine addiction. Her involvement in bank and check fraud schemes. Her not working a real job in *years.* The house of lies Lexy built had collapsed into million pieces. Everyone was able to see her self-destruction. Able to see the person who she really was…not the person who did a good job of pretending to be.

A week had gone by and Lacey was still trying to piece everything together, wondering how and why Lexy would do this to her. Nothing made sense at all. Lexy, as far as she knew, was a six-figure commanding marketing guru who worked hard and played hard. Yeah, she may have been a bit out there when it came to her dealings with men, but cocaine?!? Like Lacey told everyone, Lexy was nothing more than a tequila and vodka drinker. She'd never seen the woman smoke a joint or down an edible, let alone snort lines of cocaine.

It was Tuesday morning. Lacey woke up early and was now sitting on her couch sipping coffee while watching the morning news. She'd been suffering from severe insomnia since finding out about everything. She hadn't even left her apartment since she rushed to the hospital that night. Truth be told, these last few weeks seemed like a crazy rollercoaster to her. She wished everything that had transpired over the last month or so was just nothing more than a mere dream. But this wasn't a dream. Not even a nightmare. This was an undeniable and dangerous reality – a reality she never thought she would be privy to experience.

She hadn't gotten the exact rundown from the police (or the FBI) on what Lexy was trying to do to her. And because she was still somewhat in the dark about everything, there was a part of her that wanted to take the leap and go and talk to Lexy herself. However, the idea of going to visit someone she considered a best friend at a jail seemed otherworldly. Lacey never imagined in a million years she would possibly one day visit someone, let alone Lexy, behind bars. Honestly, she didn't even know how to begin the process of visiting

someone who was locked up.

Since Kobe came back, he spent every single day and night with Lacey, doing his best to console her about the situation. They hadn't had sex yet though. Kobe was respectful enough to not take it there… at least just yet. And although Kobe was doing everything in his power to distract her from this crazy nightmare, nothing seemed to help alleviate Lacey's deep anguish. *How could she do this to me?!? Like, I loved her! I still love her! But I hate her for this! This is just so crazy!* Those were the thoughts scampering through her muddy, confused mind.

Her eyes off into a daze, Lacey took another sip from her coffee as she flipped through channels, still thinking about everything. "Man, that coffee actually smells good," Kobe said as he walked into the living room. He'd just finished showering and was just about to head out to take care of some business errands.

"Hey, my love," he then announced as he strolled over to the couch and sat down next to Lacey. He reached over, hugged her and planted a kiss on her cheek and forehead.

"Hey…" Lacey was despondent.

Kobe sensed Lacey's gloom, so he fell silent and threw his gaze onto the television. He pulled out his cell phone and shot some texts to a few people.

"I think I'm gonna go down there and talk to her," Lacey finally confessed. "I just gotta know why. Why would she do this to me?!? Why would she do this to herself! Like this is just so fucking perplexing to me! I trusted her with my life!"

Kobe tightened his lips, trying his best to conjure up the right reply. He could sense the raging frustration and sadness in her tone. He turned his gaze toward her and shook his lead lightly saying, "Lacey, I don't know…Like I said, I don't think that's just a good idea yet." He paused for a second to let his words marinate with her. She didn't say anything back. "Just a suggestion…but maybe…Well, I don't know…"

"What?"

"I think if you do decide to go down there, I think the best thing to do is first talk with her parents. See what they about it before you make that move." Kobe was aware of Lacey's intentions. They talked about it for a brief moment some two days ago. However, he wasn't too optimistic about her going to visit Lexy. He told her that Lexy may even reject her visit. *'She's probably still in the hospital…And besides, she is probably too embarrassed and out of her mind to even tell you everything.'* That's what he told Lacey and she then she partly agreed. But here was the thing that Kobe couldn't quite fathom: she and Lexy were more than just best friends. They were truly *sisters.* And though

they didn't share the same blood, they were there for each other through all of their difficult moments. Lacey presumed that despite this crazy, unexpected situation, she and Lexy still had that tight, shared bond. So, there had to have been a reasonable explanation for all of the madness. *Right?* Despite the shock and pain, Lacey needed immediate answers. Immediate resolution.

"Yeah, I hear you, but I need to know just to move on. Just to clear my mind…I need to know why she would lie to me and betray me. What did I ever do to her to deserve this? And why would she even get hipped to that man like that?!?"

"Lacey…" Kobe pursed his lips. "Just let things play out, baby…"

Lacey took a deep breath and exhaled. She was fighting back tears and wanted to scream at the top of her lungs. But Kobe was right, she thought. She needed to just let things play out and when the time was right, she was going to eventually have a meeting with her.

"You have a lot on your plate right now, Lacey. I mean, you got all of these job interviews lined up and what not. You'll eventually get answers. Don't let this distract you from what YOU got going on. You feel me?"

"Yeah, your right…" Lacey figured it was just best to just focus on her new, sudden relationship with Kobe. She also had some job interviews lined up. One of them she was interested in pursuing ironically turned out to be the marketing director position at the *Women's Recovery Center* – a domestic violence shelter. A place that Lexy could've sought refuge in if Derron was abusing her. Then again, Lexy had family. She had a best friend. If she truly needed help, she didn't need to run to a domestic violence shelter. She had people who loved and cared for her so much. But Lacey knew her *sister*. Bestie was too much of a prideful and uptight person to admit to her flaws and all of the craziness she had going on in her life. That fact alone made Lacey even more upset and she didn't want to think about the shit anymore. "It is what it is, I guess," she said and stood up and made her way over into the kitchen. "I gotta start getting ready. My interview is at eleven."

"Oh, where is it at?" Kobe asked as he, too, got up and made his way over to the kitchen.

"In Uptown. Off Montrose."

"Cool. I'm actually headed that way. I can drop you off if you like and pick you up. I gotta go sign the lease on the loft up in Evanston."

"It's cool. I don't wanna bog up you day. Besides, you've been here supporting me nonstop since everything went down."

"You sure? I mean, I'll be right around the corner."

"Yeah, I'm sure. Thanks though." Lacey then asked, "But you were finally able to get the space?"

Kobe had been showing her his design plans to convert an old loft space up in Evanston into a state-of-the-art photography studio. Evanston is a suburb north of the city of Chicago. Super-ambitious by nature, Kobe was going to also start teaching classes at Columbia College, an arts college in the South Loop, and eventually use his teaching experience to start his own in-house apprenticeship for aspiring photographers.

"Yup!" he replied with excitement. "We're both making boss moves!" He strolled up to Lacey, grabbed her and hugged her. "Listen…You're gonna be fine."

"Thank you," Lacey said and then the two kissed.

"Well, I guess I'll get going…Do you wanna do dinner tonight? I can cook for you," Ken said.

"Sure! What do you think you have in mind?"

"I'll let it be surprise," he replied with a huge sexy, smile. "Trust me though, I can get down."

"Oh, I remember…Remember how you use to cook all the time in the dorm?"

"Hell yeah!" The two kissed again. Lacey spun around then made her way to her bathroom to take a shower and get ready for her interview. Kobe made his way out to his car and just as he was about to hop in, he got a phone call. He glanced down at the number. His eyes turned to irritated slits. The phone rung for another few seconds before he answered the phone. "YO! I TOLD YOU I'M GONNA BE THERE SOON! SHIT!" he screamed.

"Okay, I'm sorry. I was jus—"

"YOU WERE JUST WHAT?!?" Kobe interrupted in low-toned snarl. "DAMN!" he suddenly hung up and threw the phone in the passenger seat. He chucked up the engine of the car and sped off.

~

"So, we just recently received a grant from the State of Illinois to expand our facility. With the $14 million grant, we're gonna be building some affordable housing units. We wanna make sure our clients have affordable housing so they can easily get back on their two feet. We're also going to be building out a new daycare facility."

Lacey was being given a tour of The Women's Recovery Center by the CEO herself. Deonica Larkins was her name and she was an older black woman with a low blonde buzz cut. Although her frame and presence was petite, she was a very vocal woman who made a lot of noise in the city.

"That is impressive, ma'am! You all seem to be on an aggressive expansion campaign."

"We surely are."

The two walked around the facility for another fifteen minutes, conversing about all of the amenities and services the nonprofit offered. After the tour ended, Ms. Larkins made Lacey meet and even sit down with a few clients and their children. She wanted her to hear their accounts of domestic violence and what it took for them to escape their dreadful situations. Ms. Larkins told her it was a part of the interview process and that she didn't want to hire someone who was too timid to work in a potentially depressing environment. Earlier, she told her bluntly – *"This is real fuckin' life. If you can't handle seeing the world's problems upfront and all of the bullshit women, especially black women, gotta go through, then this isn't the job for you…"*

This was truly unlike any job interview Lacey had ever been on. Although she only held one job for all of her career, she remembered her interviews out of college were very routine and predictably monotonous. You'd come in, meet with a recruiter, then talk with hiring manager, go over the same, stupid questions and boom – you'd find out within a week or two if you were hired.

This interview though was drastically different. Lacey was on the edge, debating whether or not she was willing to work here, especially considering all of the crazy shit that just transpired with Lexy. Although Lacey was going to be potentially hired as the nonprofit's marketing director, she didn't quite understand Ms. Larkins' reasoning for her wanting to talk to clients. It seemed a bit uncouth and extreme. Even to a degree traumatizing.

After she got done talking with Rebecca, a case worker who was once a resident, she told Ms. Larkins she needed to go use the bathroom. Once inside, she found the closest stall, whipped out her phone and called Kobe. After a few rings, the call went straight to his voicemail. Seconds later, she received a text from him.

Kobe: "Sorry – Can't talk now. Meeting with some big wigs! I'll call you ASAP once I'm done. I hope everything is going well!"

Lacey flushed the toilet although she didn't actually use it. She opened the stall's door and immediately saw Rebecca standing in a mirror, washing her hands. Lacey heard someone enter the bathroom earlier but didn't realize it was her.

"So what do you think?" Rebecca asked. She was a medium-built, slightly short, fair-skinned woman. Lacey didn't know whether or not she was mixed, she presumed she was Latina based on a slight Spanish accent she was able to pick up on.

"It's cool! You all are awesome!" Lacey lied with a faux smile. Ms. Larkins hadn't discussed salary yet, but Lacey by now already had her mind made up that this wasn't the job for her. She just didn't want to openly admit that to the woman, especially considering the

heartbreaking story she just told her.

Rebecca was a former daycare teacher who was in a tumultuous, ten-year-long violent marriage. She had two small children and she told Lacey that they had to watch her get her ass beat daily by her husband, also their father. After almost deciding to kill herself one night after being savagely attacked by the man, she decided to escape. She brought herself along with her two children down to the WRC (Women's Recovery Center). Within weeks, her husband was arrested and was sent to prison for a decade. The WRC helped her get back on her feet and she was able to go back to school to get a master's degree in social work. She believed in the mission of WRC so much that Ms. Larkins offered her a job as a senior case manager.

Rebecca smiled back and said, "You know…I can tell you are a bit scared. Don't be."

"What do you mean by that?" Lacey asked with a raised brow.

Not yet saying a word, Rebecca flashed a light grin as she turned off the sink faucet and grabbed some paper towel from an adjacent dispensary. Once she dried her hands and threw the paper towel away, she walked up to Lacey and said, "I see battered women all day long. I can tell when someone isn't being genuine about their feelings. Ms. Larkins won't be offended if you tell her this isn't the job for you."

Lacey exhaled and lowered her head out of embarrassment. Was she so turned off that she couldn't help but express her displeasure through her body language? she wondered. "I'm so sorry. I just…This is just a bit too much. Especially considering—"

Rebecca interrupted and said, "Look, you don't have to explain a thing. Jobs like this aren't for everyone. I get it. But just know this… This isn't like a regular job. Every single thing you do here will potentially save someone's life…"

Lacey froze and pursed her lips out of shame.

Rebecca then uttered, "Good luck with everything, Ms. Franklin. I'm sure you'll find what you're looking for…" She patted Lacey on her shoulder and then strolled out of the bathroom. Moments later, Lacey made her way back to Ms. Larkins' office.

"Everything alright? Had something bad to eat?" Ms. Larkins joked from behind her shiny mahogany wood desk.

"I'm sorry—"

"Girl, I was just playing! Sit down!" Ms. Larkins said interrupting Lacey before she could come up with a reason as to why she was in the bathroom for so long.

Lacey sat down. Ms. Larkins folded her hands and peered Lacey deep into her eyes.

"I like you a lot. I think you'll make a great fit here. I'd like to extend you an offer of employment. Obviously, conditional based on a

successful background check…What do you think?"

Lacey thought for a few seconds. "Ms. Larkins…I, umm…I think that ughh…."

Chapter Thirty-Five

"I think that, ugh…" All of a sudden, Lacey became distracted as her eyes flew over Ms. Larkins' shoulder and immediately attached to a medium-sized framed picture of Rebecca and her two kids. It was one of those stereotypical and corny JCPenny's family portraits. Rebecca was laying on her side, her head resting upward on her open palm. Her two children, a boy and a girl, were snuggled up under her. There wasn't any man in the picture – which meant this was obviously a more recent photo. Usually, in these types of family portraits though, it was more than common to also see a smiling, bubbly father/husband/boyfriend in the midst. But knowing Rebecca's story, it was a good thing *that* man wasn't in it. And if he was, the picture would be melancholic and nausea-inducing.

"You what?" Ms. Larkins said with her arched eyebrow raised to the heavens.

"I'm sorry. I just got distracted for a second."

"By what?"

"The picture behind you. That's Rebecca, right?" Lacey thought about Rebecca's words while they were in the bathroom. And seeing Rebecca's beaming face made Lacey realize she was right. Even if Lacey was just going to run the organization's marketing, having virtually little interaction with the WRC's clients, her actions would still directly impact their lives – even the lives of others who have yet to come through the WRC's doors.

"Yeeaaaaahhhhhhh?" Ms. Larkins was perplexed as to where Lacey was going with her question.

"I'll gladly accept the position."

Ms. Larkins let out a light chuckle and clapped her hands in excitement. "I knew you would…Believe it or not, Rebecca and I had a bet. She said you would take it."

"Really?" Lacey replied. Damn, she didn't get that vibe at all from Rebecca moments earlier. Was she playing reverse psychology on her or something to that effect? Lacey wondered.

"And what did you think I would do?" Lacey asked, curious as to what Ms. Larkins thought now that she accepted the position.

"Girl, I knew you were gonna accept it, too."

"How?"

"You have a soul…unlike others…"

Ms. Larkins had an offer letter already typed out, signed and dated. "Here's the official offer letter. Tell me what you think about the salary…" The CEO slid the letter across her desk in Lacey's direction. Lacey gulped, wondering what salary was listed on the letter. She glanced down at the short offer letter and quickly scanned it. Once her eyes zoomed down to the listed salary, they widened in shock. "$145,000??!? Is this a typo? You meant to type $45,000, right?"

Shit…If it was $45,000, Lacey was going to kindly rescind her acceptance of the position. She was making over $60,000 in her last role and was hoping to make $80k in a new one. Obviously $45,000 was just way too low of a salary and now she was even irritated at herself that she didn't bother to ask about salary before agreeing to accept the position. Hell, afterall, that was standard job hunt protocol. Any smart person would ask about salary first before you end up wasting your time going through a lengthy interview process.

"No…Not a typo. Hell, we're a nonprofit. And nonprofits definitely can't afford to make those types of typographical mistakes."

Lacey clasped her mouth. "Thank you! Yes! I will accept! I can start today if you'd like!"

"Oh, girl, stop it! Just take the time to celebrate. The work will be here when you start. Besides, I don't need you to start until the beginning of next month anyways. That's when we get our grant funding."

Some tears of joy ran down Lacey's face. "Thank you so much for the opportunity, Ms. Larkins!" she exclaimed, fanning herself with her hands.

Both women stood up and gave each other a hug. "No, thank you! Welcome to the team! We got lives to empower!"

After Lacey and Ms. Larkins talked for a few more minutes, she made her way out of the building and onto the busy thoroughfare. Elated by the news of the new job, she whipped out her phone and was about to call Kobe. Ironically, she saw she had a missed call from him. He must've called while she was talking to Ms. Larkins about the job offer, Lacey presumed. She called him back, and within seconds he answered.

"Hey there! So, how'd it go?"

"I GOT THE JOB!" Lacey screamed.

"Damn! Congrats! I'm so happy for you, Lacey! That's awesome! Is this what you want? Is the money where you want it to be at?"

"Don't even get me started on that! The salary is CRAZY!"

"What is it? If you don't mind me asking?"

"$145,000!!!"

"WHAT?!? You've got to be fucking kidding me?!? Lacey, that is AWESOME! Wait! Where are you now? I'm still over here in Evanston! I can come get you if you like!"

"Cool! I mean, no rush, if you're busy that is! I can take a Lyft to you if you like…"

"Nah! I'm coming right now…"

"Okay, cool. You want me to send you the address?"

"Sure. I'm leaving now. I'll be there, hrrm, let's say, twenty minutes?"

"Perfect! See you soon!" Lacey hung up.

~

"So…is that *her*?"

Kobe had just got off the phone with Lacey when suddenly his euphoric mood was assassinated by snarky, inquisitive words pouring from another woman's mouth.

"Man…mind your business," Kobe grumbled smacking his teeth. He turned around and threw the woman standing right behind him a menacing gawk.

The woman – slender and high-yellow – stood there, holding her waist, tapping her right foot rapidly against the floor. "Why that face? 'Cause I caught you, fucking liar?"

Kobe shook his head and gently shoved the woman out of his way. "Listen…I gotta go. Like I told you, it is what it is," he replied.

The light shove instantly triggered the woman. A heavy scowl now sat on her face. "That's just so fucked up, Kobe. As much as I've done for you! Been there for you! All the money I sent you when your ass was broke. This is the fucking treatment I get? All over a bitch you hadn't even fucked yet?!?"

"Sonya…What?!? What the fuck are you talking about right now?!?"

"NIGGA, DON'T PLAY DUMB!"

"Woman! Please, stop! Just stop! You and I have been over for quite some time now. I'm just letting you know what the deal is."

"When the fuck did you tell me things were over?!? I wasn't aware of this shit until you brought your Indiana Jones wannabe ass back to Chicago. You're such a fucking liar! I should've known! Just like the rest of these no good ass niggas! You're not even man enough to admit that you're wrong!"

Kobe quickly yanked a duffle bag off a small, black leather couch nestled in the quaint, small apartment living room. Sonya lived out in the Ravenswood neighborhood in a two-flat, not too far away from the

WRC over up in Uptown. With no time to spare, Kobe scanned the immediate area around the couch, ensuring he had all of his belongings packed in the duffle bag. He proceeded to make his way toward the door. Sonya trailed him then grabbed him from behind. "LOOK AT ME AND TELL ME THE TRUTH!" she screamed.

Kobe turned around and looked the woman up and down out of disgust. "I told you everything, Sonya. WE. ARE. DONE. So, sorry if this isn't the outcome you were expecting, but this is MY life. I'm making a decision for ME. Just like you made plenty of decisions for YOU!"

"Yeah, yeah, yeah! Just leave! Do like what every other dude does when they get confronted with the truth. But you know what I find pretty ironic…You're just like your father! You're even gonna abandon your own child for someone you don't even know like that anymore."

"Yo! STOP WITH THE BULLSHIT, SONYA! You know good and goddamn well that boy is not my child! Why do you keep playing these fucking games with me!"

Sonya threw a look of shock at Kobe. "NOT YOUR CHILD?!? Nigga, who the fuck else got me pregnant?!?"

"Bitch, I was fucking travelling all over the goddamn world when you suddenly showed up pregnant!"

"BITCH?!?" Sonya said perplexed. *I know this nigga ain't callin' ME no 'bitch'.* "Who you callin' a bitch?!? YA MAMA IS A BITCH, FUCK NIGGA!" Sonya screamed and, all of a sudden, she began throwing a barrage of punches at Kobe. Kobe threw his hands up out of defense to stop her from hitting him. She was not relenting though. "CLOWN ASS NIGGA! BROKE ASS NIGGA! I HOPE EVERYTHING YOU DO FAILS!"

"Stop hitting me, Sonya!" Kobe cried as he attempted to get away from Sonya. She wasn't slowing down though. Suddenly, she dashed over to her coffee table in the living room, picked up a vase and threw it at the man. "THE FUCK?!?" Kobe yelled as he ducked. The vase hit the wall right above his head, instantly splattering shards of ceramic and dirt all over the place.

"BITCH! Are you fucking out of your mind?!?!"

"NO! YOU ARE! And I'm not signing shit either! HOW 'BOUT THAT!"

Kobe stood there, breathing hard. "YO! Calm down, Sonya! You're gonna have a panic attack!"

"I hope your mothers dies from breast cancer, too, fucking loser!"

"WHAT?!? Are you fucking crazy, bitch?!?" Kobe roared hearing that last statement. One of the reasons why Kobe decided to move back to the Chi was because he found out his mother had stage-2 breast cancer. Although his mother's prognosis didn't have death in sight and she was currently responding well to her chemo treatments,

Kobe didn't find her situation no laughing matter. No one in their right mind would. And for Sonya to make such a callous, cold-hearted statement meant she was losing her shit big time. And all this was because Kobe was ready to cut the cord and distance himself from the obviously crazed woman. But what the *crazy bitch* just uttered were also fighting words. And now Kobe was ready to lunge at the woman and shake the shit out of her until she got her act right. But he wasn't that type of guy. He'd never put his hands on her, let alone any other woman. Never even been in a physical fight with another dude. Kobe was the quintessential 'good guy'. Dude wouldn't even harm a fly…at least that was what many assumed.

Sonya's words marinated within seconds and Kobe's disposition changed. Although he was inches away from the door and could've easily escaped her apartment, his face devolved into an intense, scary stare. He balled his fists up and strolled up to Sonya.

"Ohhhh! What you gon do?!? You mad now, huh?!" she teased and laughed.

Without hesitation, he grabbed her by her throat with one hand and slammed her down to the couch. She tried to resist and fight him off, throwing punches and kicks, but none were successful at getting Kobe's hand from around her neck. He gripped harder, but not too hard to cut off her breathing. He leaned down and stared deeply into her now-fretful brown eyes. "DON'T YOU EVER IN YOUR FUCKING LIFE SAY THAT SHIT ABOUT MY MOTHER EVER AGAIN," he growled and quickly let her go.

"OH NO! FUCK THAT! Nigga, you fuckin' put your hands on me! You crazy bastard! I'm gonna call the cops!"

"WHATEVER, SONYA! Call them! But I'm telling you right now – if you call them, I'll just go ahead and leak them photos…Let's see if your mother would like the fact that you've been fucking your stepfather for years, you nasty ass bitch!"

"FUCK YOU, ASSHOLE! AND FOR THE RECORD, THAT IS YOUR CHILD! I'M GONNA GET THE COURTS ON YOUR ASS AND MAKE YOU DO A DNA TEST!" the woman screamed laughing.

"Okay! Whatever, bitch! And when you do and that shit comes back negative, let's see who'll be laughing then. Have a nice life, crazy ass hoe!" Kobe chuckled and dashed out of the apartment. Once Kobe got outside to the street, he quickly hopped in his rental and sped down the busy city street to the WRC.

Chapter Thirty-Six

Mid-mornings inside MCC were filled with tedium. After breakfast (which ended at eight am), most inmates spent the remaining morning in their cells until lunch and gym time. With hours to spare, most inmates used the time to dive themselves into their own thoughts, TV or old, dusty books inside the facility's library.

Derron wasn't a big TV guy. And he didn't have the mental capacity and patience to distract himself with fiction novels. Right now, his mind stayed on liberation. So, Derron spent his morning inside f his cell, laying idly on his bed.

A few other inmates were watching television. A rerun of Law & Order was lowly blaring. Even among the din of laughs, oohs and ahhs, Derron was soundless and motionless. The only thing moving on him was his chest slowly rising up and down as he took deep, long, meditative breaths. Even his eyes were unblinking as he ogled at the cell's bone -white ceiling.

While everyone around him seemed to be amused by the police drama, Derron was contemplating his exit strategy. *Muhfuckas got me fucked up if they think I'm gonna be here for the rest of my fuckin' life.* He finally blinked. Then his eyes turned to vengeful slits as he counted down his remaining days in his head. Freedom, not temporary freedom, but *real* freedom was right around the corner.

"Mr. Harrington! You have a visit!" A middle-aged white jail guard announced as he walked up to Derron's cell.

Derron immediately stood up, adjusted himself and walked out of the cell, trailing the guard down to the visitor's area. Derron was expecting to speak to his lawyer today about his upcoming bond hearing. Since getting locked up, Derron worked tirelessly in trying to move secret stashes of money around to pay his bail and his lawyer's retainer.

"Good," Derron mumbled and quickly got out of the bed. His asshole-confidence was slowly coming back. He felt good about the trajectory of how his plan was unfolding. He sauntered toward the exit of the cell. Once he got to the guard, cuffs were slapped on his wrists and ankles.

“Who’s here to visit me?” Derron asked, playing stupid.

The guard scrunched his face and said, “Fuck if I know?!?” The guard tightened the cuffs and shoved Derron. “Just shut the fuck up and follow me,” he said.

Derron got down to the visitor’s area. Given the nature of Derron’s charges, he had to speak to his attorney on a monitored phone line. The guard escorted Derron down to his assigned visitor’s booth. It was your typical jail visitor’s booth – a bulletproof window partition separated visitor from inmate.

Derron sat down and picked up the black phone. Mr. Kulinsky, his attorney, did the same. Mr. Kulinsky was an older, fat, gray-haired Jew who gained infamy for being one of R. Kelly’s criminal defense attorneys when he got in trouble some years ago.

“Derron…How’s it going?”

“You ask me the same shit every time I see you, Mr. Kulinsky. What do you expect me to say?”

“Sorry…”

“Anyways, so, were you able to get the funds from my guy?” Derron asked.

“Yeah…We got it. Thanks. That’ll be enough to cover the retainer and then some. I wasn’t expecting that much, to be honest with you.”

“Well, I gave you the extra squeeze ‘cause I’mma need you to put in a fight for your life. And on that note, the last time we talked, you said this particular judge might be a little lenient during the bond hearing. How certain are you of that?”

“Well, I went to law school with Judge Sullivan. He’s a good guy. I’ll work my magic, so we’ll get you bonded out in a day or so. But Derron…I, umm, I don’t know how to tell you this, but have you had a chance to read the updated affidavit of charges?”

“No. Why?”

Mr. Kulinsky pulled up his black briefcase, opened it and took out a thick copy of the federal affidavit. Once he found the page he was looking for, he held it up against the window for Derron to see. “Read that…The second paragraph. The third sentence.”

Derron’s eyes quickly scanned the Fed’s criminal affidavit against him. He read aloud what Mr. Kulinsky was referring to. “…With agreement from a chief prosecutorial witness, **ALEXANDRIA SOTT**, we have secured enough evidence to charge the listed defendant with…”

Within microseconds, Derron burst into visible, monstrous anger. “Are you FUCKING kidding me right now?!?” Derron growled into the phone. Yeah, Derron read that shit right. Lexy had apparently agreed to testify against Derron.

“Where the fuck is she now?!?”

"She's…here, too."

"What you mean?!?"

"Derron – they also got her on a whole bunch of charges. She's apparently agreeing to testify against you in exchange for a reduced sentence."

"I don't believe that bitch! I knew she was gonna flip on me! FUCKING BITCH!" Derron's rage and PTSD began to kick into high gear and Mr. Kulinsky noticed it. "Derron, please, calm down, sir. This isn't a good look."

Derron's breathing was rapid and heavy as he tried his best to collect himself. "Sorry," he apologized and then massaged the side of his head. "So, what I gotta do to stop her from agreeing to doing any of this shit?" Derron asked, formulating a back-up plan in his head.

"Unfortunately, Derron, she already signed a plea agreement with the federal prosecutor. If she gives them everything they want, she's only gonna get a year of probation and then she has to go into a drug rehab program."

"BUT SHE HELPED ME WITH SOME OF THIS SHIT?!?" Derron screamed. Mr. Kulinsky jumped in his seat at hearing Derron's extreme rage.

"Derron! Please…You're scaring me right now."

"Well, I'm scared, too, Mr. Kulinsky. There's no fucking way in hell I'm gonna stay in here for the rest of my life!"

"I understand that, Derron, but you're gonna have to get yourself together! I can't have you flipping out in court like this! You want to be a free man, act like one, please…"

"Fine…"

Mr. Kulinsky pursed his lips and then said, "I also have an update about the Jennifer woman you told me about. I had my PI go track her down."

"Okay, so where the fuck she at?"

"She's back home with her parents…" Mr. Kulinsky froze for a second. "She's been committed to a mental health hospital. She had a nervous breakdown."

Derron lowered and shook his head. "Is she still pregnant?"

"I looked into that as well…" Mr. Kulinsky paused for a moment tightening his thin pink lips. "So, turns out she was never pregnant. She made it all up. The girl is demented."

"I fucking KNEW it! And that fucking Kelsey fell for that shit! Stupid ass!"

"Yeah, I'm sorry…" Mr. Kulinsky then said, "Anyways, I have to get going. I'll see what else I can do in regard to Alexandria. I might have to dig some stuff up on her. Only thing I can think of at the moment is to impeach her as a witness. I've done it before in local

trials. But these are the feds. They have something from her already, so we might be shooting blanks with her."

"Okay," Derron said and immediately hung the phone up. "Ay, yo, guard! I'm ready," he shouted down the corridor, getting the attention the guard who escorted him down here.

Derron got back to his cell and went back to his bed. His fellow inmates were still glued to the television. This time they were watching an episode of Judge Judy. Derron took a quick scan of his cell, ensuring no one was around for him to see. He slid his hand under his mattress and pulled out a small Nokia burner phone. He shot a text to a 708 number. The sole contact in the phone.

312-522-9684: Yo. I got another situation. This bitch now snitchin on me. She gotta go. ASAP. Can your person on the inside get to her?

A minute later, the phone buzzed. Derron looked around his cell. He got a message back.

708-569-9001: Sure thing…It's gon cost somethin major tho. At least 100k. You got it like that?

312-522-9684: Yeah. I'm good with the price. It's gon hurt but it's pay or stay.

708-569-9001: Cool. I'll hit my guy and see wassup. Ill text you ASAP with a conf. Got the passports and IDs.

312-522-9684: Good lookin' fam. TTYL.

Derron turned the phone off and sneaked it back under his mattress. He rolled over to his side and threw his gaze onto a roach pilgriming across the corner of the cell. Although he hadn't told his lawyer his *real* intentions, Derron planned on skipping town. Actually, skipping the country…for good. Derron be damned if he was going to spend decades behind bars.

While in the military, Derron learned some Arabic while he was stationed overseas in Iraq. The Middle East would be the perfect place to escape to, he figured. He had his eyes set on either Morocco or Jordan.

Paul, aka "708", was one of his former business associates. He was an extremely intelligent and elusive hacker and a credit card scammer who had deep connections to the dark web. Derron and Paul also served in the military together, and after they were both discharged, Paul went off and became a banker for Chase. Some years later, Paul ended up getting fired and was busted months later by the Feds for conspiracy to commit mail fraud. He accepted a plea deal and was put on probation, but the charges on his record made it virtually impossible for him to ever step land a legit, high-paying finance gig. With no other real career options, Paul devoted himself full-time to be a Dark Web consultant, helping people get all types of crazy shit. Drugs. Fake credit cards. Social security numbers. You name it, Paul

could get his dirty hands on it. Even for-hire hitmen…

When Derron initially consulted with his lawyer when he first got booked, he already mapped out his plan. He quickly got into contact with Paul and now had the man executing his plan. Paul's last text just confirmed he was able to secure fake IDs, passports and other materials necessary in order to ensure Derron had a safe transition into a new identity. But now that it seemed like Lexy was gonna run her fucking mouth to the Jakes, Derron needed Paul to add another item to his task list – shut that bitch up by any means necessary…

Chapter Thirty-Seven

"Bitch, yo pussy stank! Fuck wrong witchu!" Lieutenant Jackson turned his face up at the fishy odor emanating from the woman's spread open ass. "Got me fucked up!"

"Boy, bye! You ain't said that last night!" the thick, dark brown stripper retorted smacking her teeth. She threw her head back and gave Lieutenant Jackson a gawk of

disappointment.

"Bitch, I was drunk! The fuck?!? Now I'm sober and yo shit smell like an old ass crab

boil! I'm good!" he said and stood up from out of the bed.

Lieutenant Jackson was in his apartment's bedroom, seconds away from cracking open a can of some stripper coochie. But the dick-down session came to a screeching halt once he got a whiff of the woman's pussy.

"Get the fuck out my shit, nasty ass hoe! Ya mama didn't teach you proper hygiene or some shit?!?"

The woman didn't say shit. She quickly got out of the bed and scrambled to grab her shit. "Nigga, just give me my coins and I'll be glad to leave!"

Lieutenant Jackson's face scrunched in confusion. "Bitch! I ain't paying you shit! You ain't gave me shit so I ain't giving you shit!"

"MOTHAFUCKA! You better give me my $50!"

"FINE! Here's $60! Now get yo raggedy black, dusty ass out of my shit, bitch!"

"You ain't gotta tell me twice!" Within minutes, the woman was out the door.

Lieutenant Jackson plopped his naked, burly behind back into his king-sized bed. He turned on his television and tuned into a Bulls game. It was nearing evening. He had the day off and wanted to spend the entire day busting down some pussy walls. But the stripper bitch he paid to come by and do him some justice seemed to have been taking one too many hoes baths. Her ass needed a real shower. And truth be told, she probably needed to douche or a grab a prescription for some antibiotics to clear up her obvious bacterial vaginosis.

Buzz. Buzz. Buzz.

Lieutenant Jackson was fondling himself but once he heard his cell phone vibrating on his nightstand, he took his right hand off his dick and snatched his phone of its charger. “LIL PAUL” popped up on the screen.

“Sup, gang?”

“Ay, waddup, broski. You busy?” It was Mr. 708. Paul. Derron’s *associate*.

“Nah. Well. Just had a bitch slide through but I kicked her ass to the curb. Stank ass hoe. Wassup though?”

“Ay, so I got one of my guys locked up at your facility. They got his ass on some serious shit. A bitch that’s locked up with him too about to rat to the Feds. My guy needs some help with getting rid of the bitch. You think can help?”

Lieutenant Jackson chuckled. “Nigga, you callin’ me on my line about this shit?!?” he said. “Anyways…What’s the nigga’s name? You know the price gon have to be right and the last time you tried to get me to do some shit, you fuck niggas was only talkin’ about ten-k.”

“Derron.”

“Derron?”

“Yeah. Derron. Feds raided his shit the other day. Shit was even on the news.”

Lieutenant Jackson’s eyes amplified out of suspicion. Oh, *that* Derron, he thought. “Hrrrm…how much this nigga talkin’?”

“A hunned-k”

“Hunned-k? Like, one-hundred thousand?”

“Yeah…You know, for the referral, I’ll take my ten-percent though.”

“So, this nigga wants me to find the bitch that’s snitching on him and get rid of her?”

“Yeah.”

“Fifty percent needs to be in my account by tomorrow. None of that BitCoin shit either.”

“Gotcha. I’ll let him know.”

“Good. And next time, don’t hit my line with no fuck shit like this.”

“Got it.”

“Cool…”

Lieutenant Jackson hung up the phone and tossed it to the side. “Stupid ass nigga…,” he laughed shaking his head. Then he thought for a moment. He shot out of the bed, dashed into his closet and threw his uniform back on. Within an hour, he made his way up to MCC to do some ‘overtime’.

~

“Wow! These are sooooo delicious! I’ve never had Tibetan food before! Like, wow! I was sooo skeptical at first!” Lacey laughed as she took a bite out of some crazy, spicy Tibetan dish Kobe made for her.

They were sitting in her dining room, enjoying the dish. “I told you to trust my instincts,” he commented and took a sip of red wine. “The Tibetans believe cayenne pepper makes you live for an eternity.” He went on and on, dishing out all of the secrets to cooking Tibetan cuisine.

“So, what’s for dessert?” Lacey asked and right before Kobe was just about the answer her question, her phone began to vibrate.

The two paused for a second and threw each other gawk. “Sorry,” Lacey said. She knew it was her phone. Kobe believed that anything tech-related should be turned off during dinner. Lacey thought she turned her phone off as well, but obviously it was still on. “Awww! Come on, now!” Kobe roared playfully.

“I know, I know! I thought I turned it off!” Lacey got up from her seat and grabbed her cell phone off the countertop inside of her kitchen. It was Mr. Scott calling her. Lacey’s brow raised in concern. “It’s Lexy’s dad…,” Lacey muttered but Kobe didn’t hear her. He stuffed some pita bread in his mouth and took another sip of wine.

“Hey! Good evening, Mr. Scott. How’s it going?” she answered.

“Lacey. Are you home?” Mr. Scott said.

“Yes, I am.”

“I got some bad news, my dear…” Mr. Scott paused for a moment and suddenly Lacey could sniffles, cries and sobs in the background. “My baby! My baby!” Lacey knew that had to have been Mrs. Scott wailing in the background. “Mr. Scott – what’s wrong?” Lacey asked clutching her chest. By now Kobe had heard what Lacey uttered and he, too, became concerned just by hearing the grave tone of Lacey’s voice.

“It’s about Lexy…”

“What’s wrong, Mrs. Scott?” Lacey asked in a high-pitched voice. Her heart rate began to pick up because she obviously knew something was wrong.

~

Derron’s stomach grumbled with monstrous intensity as he lay in his bed reading an old LIFE magazine. After coming back with his visit with Mr. Kulinsky, his lawyer, he started to feel somewhat ill. Now, the combination of lightheadedness and nausea swam throughout his body.

The crazy thing was the nigga hadn't eaten a single thing since he got locked. He could've gone days, sometimes even a week, without food. Fasting was something Derron incorporated regularly into his lifestyle. In fact, going without food gave him immense energy. However, after getting locked up, it seemed as if fasting wasn't doing its job. Energy had been completely sucked out of him. All of sudden, the urge to cough came up. For the next few moments, he laid in the bed, coughing up a storm. "Shit!" he groaned feeling exasperated by what seemed like an eternal cough. Suddenly, the coughing began again, but this time it became more intense.

It was almost nine PM and not a single sound could be heard throughout the jail. Everyone was in their cells for the night. MCC had strict rules about noise and any prisoner who dared to make a sound would find themselves thrown into solitary confinement for a week.

"Ay, man! You good?" one of his fellow inmates asked in a whisper, not wanting to violate the jail's stern noise policy. He was resting in the bunk above him. "You coughin' like you got some shit, bruh!"

"Ye-yeah." Derron could barely get the words out. His lungs felt like they were on fire. His throat felt like someone poured acid down it. Just like that, he began to cough again – but this time he felt something odd slither up from his lungs. He spat out the slimy mix he coughed up into his palms as he immediately darted out of his bed. He dashed toward a sink inside the cell. The cell was barely lit, so Derron couldn't quite make out what exactly was in his hands just yet. He'd just assumed it was mucus. The weird symptoms seemed to have come out of nowhere. First, it started with a light cough but as the evening progressed, things seemed to get worse. Derron assumed he was coming down with a nasty cold – all courtesy to the nasty ass, uncivilized inmates he was rooming with.

Once he got to the sink and mirror, he opened his hand. A small, radiating lightbulb fixed above the mirror illuminated the contents buried in his palms – it was thick blood mixed with green-brownish mucous. Derron, now cold and sweaty, shuddered at the sight of the blood. He threw the faucet on and washed the blood off his hands. *What the fuck?!?* he thought. Suddenly, his stomach pains intensified but Derron managed to saunter back over to his bed.

Once he got in it, he rolled on his left side, thinking perhaps acid reflux was the source of his abrupt sickness. *Buzz. Buzz.* It was his burning phone vibrating. 708 shot him a text. Derron looked around as he swiftly dug his hand under his mattress and pulled the phone out. He read the text. "All set…" the text read. He planted the phone back up under the mattress. But the confirmation coming from Paul didn't alleviate the immense pain and nausea that was now bogging

down Derron. Something was wrong. Completely *wrong*. Derron knew his body and this was the first time ever in his thirty-seven years of life he felt this *ill*.

He slowly climbed out of his bed and meandered over to the entrance of the cell, but before he could call for help from a guard, he collapsed to the ground. Another inmate saw Derron fall hard to the floor and he didn't hesitate in screaming, "AY! OFFICER! Help! This nigga just passed the fuck OUT!"

Chapter Thirty-Eight

"I got some bad news, my dear…" Mr. Scott paused for a moment and suddenly Lacey could sniffles, cries and sobs in the background. "My baby! My baby!" Lacey knew that had to have been Mrs. Scott wailing in the background. "Mr. Scott – what's wrong?" Lacey asked clutching her chest. By now Kobe had heard what Lacey uttered and he, too, became concerned just by hearing the grave tone of Lacey's voice.

"It's about Lexy…"

"What's wrong, Mrs. Scott?" Lacey asked in a high-pitched voice. Her heart rate began to pick up because she obviously knew something was wrong.

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Mr. Scott began to bawl and then he muttered out, "Be-Belinda died…"

Lacey clutched her mouth and her eyes suddenly grew wide in shock. "Oh no! Mr. Scott, I'm so sorry!" she cried but was confused as to who the background sobs and moans were coming from. Then it hit Lacey, that was probably Ms. Shelly, Mrs. Scott's mother, also Lexy's grandmother. "What happened, Mr. Scott? I am so shocked right now!"

"She had a fatal heart attack a few hours ago. The paramedics did everything they could to try to save her. She's gone. My dear wife is gone," he sobbed. Mr. Scott began to cry even harder over the phone. Lacey's tears were immediately triggered by Mr. Scott's endless sobs. "I should've just listened to her! WHY, GOD?!? WHY?!?"

"Oh my God, I'm so sorry, Mr. Scott! Do you want to come over?" she asked. "It's okay…I just gotta start preparing. I just wanted to call you and let you know," the grieving father and husband replied.

It was such unexpected news. Lacey talked to Mrs. Scott just a few days ago to get an update on Lexy's condition. She could tell then that Mrs. Scott was still very much distraught and heartbroken about Alexandria's situation. Nonetheless, Lexy was making a full recovery and she was currently in rehab at a prison nursing facility somewhere

in the 'burbs.

Mrs. Scott's unexpected passing was obviously a shock to Lexy. But the more she quickly pondered over everything that happened over the last few weeks, the more she could see how this fucked up situation would drive the anguished mother into an early grave.

On that same conversation Lacey had with Mrs. Scott some days ago, Lacy could tell by Mrs. Scott's frantic and manic tone that she wasn't just stressed out about Lexy – she was losing her shits. And that was because apparently, she and Mr. Scott had been fighting over whether or not they should help Lexy.

$325,000. That was how much it was going to cost in lawyer fees in order to get Lexy out of her situation. Even with the federal prosecutors offering Lacey a plea deal, she now had to fight an array of other state and local charges that were going to still land her some time behind bars.

Such a crazy price tag to retain a top-notch lawyer. But in America, freedom has a price. A huge price at that. $325,000 was nothing if you were trying to fight criminal charges. Shit, it was common for people to spend millions when they were trying to fight aggressive prosecutors. Especially the Feds.

Trouble was though Mrs. Scott didn't know where in the hell she was going to get the money to help Lexy get out of her legal bind. Although the Scotts were pretty well-off – Mr. Scott used to be a doctor and Mrs. Scott was a former high school assistant principal – they were now retirees on a strict monthly income. At this point, Mrs. Scott surmised the only possible solution was for her and her husband to sell their prized Northside mini-mansion and move into an apartment or a condo…at least for now.

Truth be told, now that the Scotts were retirees well into their sixties, they were already planning on selling their house and relocating to Atlanta. They were like every other black Chicagoan – on a mission to escape the Windy city's dreadful combination of cold weather, violence, high property taxes, and political corruption. The Scotts for years had their eyes set on buying a huge estate nestled somewhere in the forests of suburban Atlanta. But now, with Lexy in a serious legal bind, that dream was going to be deferred… Well, not really…And that was because Mr. Scott was going to defer shit for his wayward daughter. Mr. Scott was adamant about not helping Lexy at all. '*She put herself one-hundred percent into her situation and she needed to see her way out of it by herself*'. So, with no other real possibility to help Lexy, it seemed Mrs. Scott decided to give up…literally. She probably died from a broken heart.

Kobe had no idea what was going on but he knew something was terribly wrong given Lacey's sudden dejected appearance. He got up

from the dinner table and slowly strolled up to Lacey and held her. Lacey was still crying and somewhat sobbing. She continuously shook her head and sniffled. Kobe rubbed her back. He assumed that it was news coming from Alexandria's parents that she had passed away.

"Mr. Scott…Does Lexy know yet?" Lacey asked. Kobe's eyebrow raised in suspicion. *Then who died?* he thought still consoling Lacey.

Mr. Scott exhaled and replied with, "No. I haven't told her yet. No one has. We don't know how. She's just now getting her full senses back and everything. This is gonna be so hard on her."

"I know. I, ughh, I am here if you need anything, Mr. Scott. I'll keep you and everyone in my prayers. Sorry for your loss. I loved Mrs. Scott like my own mother. She will definitely be missed."

"Thank you, Lacey. I really appreciate it. Tell your folks I said hi by the way."

"I will, Mr. Scott. You try to get some rest. It sounds like you need it."

"I need a stiff drink. That's what I need. I'll talk to you later."

"Okay, Mr. Scott. Love you." They both hung up the phone. Lacey wiped her cheeks free from tears as Kobe glanced down at her and asked her, "What happened?"

"Mrs. Scott passed away. She had a fatal heart attack."

"Oh, wow! Lacey, I'm so sorry to hear all of this! How is Mr. Scott doing?"

"Devastated," she replied. "I know they had been fighting over how to help Lexy. Mr. Scott told Mrs. Scott they weren't gonna sell their house to help Lexy."

"Damn…He was serious then, I guess," Kobe replied shaking his head. The two meandered back over to the dinner table and sat down. Dinner was somewhat ruined now although they were almost done when Lacey got the call.

"I…I just don't know what to say or think anymore. Everything is just moving so fast. Like, it's just so weird to me," Lacey said as she continued to let out sorrowful tears. "I'm sorry, babe. I know this shit is crazy. Life has a way of being beautifully dark sometimes. I never thought my mom's cancer would bring me back to Chicago for me to then fall back in love with you," he confessed. "Such irony."

Lacey glanced up at Kobe and smiled. "Yeah, that is pretty weird."

Kobe tried to lighten up the conversation a bit. "I know you are pretty upset right now, but umm, do you still want dessert? I know it won't make you feel any better, but at least it'll temporarily get your mind off everything."

"Sure…"

"Okay," Kobe said and quickly shot up from his seat and made his way over to the kitchen. Just as he opened the fridge to pull out some

sweet yet spicy Saudi Arabian custard dessert he prepared earlier, his cell phone began to vibrate in his pocket. The phone still vibrating, he quickly pulled the dessert out of the fridge and set it on the counter then whipped out his phone. He looked down at the number and instantly a heavy scowl came over his face.

It was Sonya.

FUCK! What the fuck does this crazy bitch want?!? he thought and quickly looked around to see if Lacey had her eyes on him. She didn't – she was actually now in the living room laying on a couch rubbing her temples. "You okay?" he asked from the kitchen. "Yeah, I'm fine… I just have a headache, that's all." "Okay, I'm sitting dessert out to let it thaw for a moment. I gotta run to the bathroom right quick," Kobe responded and dashed to the bathroom.

The phone was still vibrating. Kobe would've rejected the call but he didn't want to play those types of games with her. She was starting to show another side – her lunatic side – and Kobe wanted to tread carefully with her. Once he got inside the bathroom, he quickly locked the door and answered the phone by saying, "Sonya, please, just stop. We are over. There is nothing more we need to discuss..."

"Oh, it ain't over until Sonya mothafuckin' sings. You fucked with the wrong bitch!"

"Huh? What?!? You're out of your mind, Sonya. Go get some help."

"HELP!??!? Nigga, I don't need help! You're the one who is gonna need help once I get done with yo lying, manipulative ass!"

Knock-knock! Kobe's eyes widened in fear and he threw a fretful gaze at the bathroom door. The phone was still latched to his ear when he heard Lacey ask, "Is everything okay in there?"

"Yeah! I think I put too much cayenne pepper in the food. My stomach is hurting big time. Sorry."

"Ohhhh! I knew it! I told you cayenne and ghost pepper is a lethal combo! I got some tums in the medicine cabinet…Just FYI!"

"OH, SO YOU AT THE BITCH'S HOUSE RIGHT NOW?!?!? AND YOU MADE DINNER FOR THE BITCH?!?! YOU AIN'T NEVER COOKED FOR ME! IT WAS ALWAYS MOTHAFUCKIN' DOMINO'S OR HAROLD'S CHICKEN!" Kobe heard Sonya shouting through the phone. Although he didn't have Sonya on speaker, her voice was loud and discernible enough to resonate throughout the bathroom. He quickly muzzled the phone's speaker.

"What's that noise? Is…Is that your stomach making that weird, shouting noise?" Lacey asked.

"Yeah…I'll be out soon. Can, you, umm, just give me some privacy? This is kind of embarrassing…"

"YEAH! EMBARRASSING ALRIGHT!" Sonya screamed. Kobe

tightened his lips and shook his head out of anger.

"Sorry…," Lacey apologized and walked off back to the living room.

"BITCH NIGGA! JUST BE READY!" Sonya hung up.

Angst over this Sonya situation drilled into Kobe's conscience. Even though she was now off the phone, he just knew she wasn't done with him. Yeah, the crazy lady could just be talking mad shit, but Kobe knew better than that. Naivete wasn't in his DNA, so he definitely understood that Sonya wasn't just going to let him walk away scot-free. The threatening phone call was probably the start of a campaign of her revengeful terrorism.

Wracked with guilt to an extent, he lowered and shook his head out of what was going to happen next. He should've seen this shit coming from a million miles away. Something told him from the first time he laid eyes on the woman that she had a spark of craziness in her.

Kobe met Sonya some years ago when he came back to Chicago for a family visit. He had been partying with some of his guys at a hole-in-the-wall stepper's lounge down in Beverly when she first caught his eye. He'd never forget that day, too. Her lunatic ass was dressed in a one-piece red leather jumpsuit with matching stilettos. Devil red bundles dangled down to her cut, muscular shoulders. She reminded him of a younger version of Tisha Campbell minus the big, spacy mouth.

An angel of conscience sitting on his right shoulder sounded off warning sign after another when he first observed her in action. Shit, even from that outlandish outfit and weave she had on, he should've known the crazy bitch had Satan living within the premises of her soul. But with henny and fire ass weed running in his system, his dick, unfortunately, had a different perception of Ms. Sonya. That night, she was the life of the party. She was literally in the center of the dance floor with her girls, dancing and beaming zesty energy that he found so attractive.

Eventually, Kobe made his way over to her and asked her for a dance. She agreed, and in fact, they spent the next several hours getting sweaty on the dance floor. Kobe's guys thought he was nuts for patronizing the woman, but he didn't care. At that time, he was back in Chicago missing his family and friends. The guy simply just wanted to live life to the fullest. Sonya was just a start to that. Nothing more, nothing less. When the night concluded, it seemed as if the two truly enjoyed each other's company. At first, they simply exchanged phone numbers. But one drink led to another…Within hours, the two woke up the next morning together in her apartment's bed.

Kobe wasn't a one night stand type of guy and he did possess (at

least at that time) some genuine interest in Sonya. The two continued to casually date for a few weeks until he got a job offer with an agency that worked with National Geographic. The new job required him to move to Europe. Sonya wanted to be in a long-distance relationship although Kobe was somewhat reluctant. But he agreed given that at that time he saw some gleaming potential in her.

Besides, she was highly supportive of his career moves. She herself was an aspiring actress and model who was a hairstylist by trade. She loved the idea of being with some spunky, adventurous and creative like herself. After Kobe moved to Belgium, Sonya would occasionally come and visit him. At times, she occasionally gave him financial assistance when he ran into some trouble with the IRS. But he quickly got his situation resolved and paid Sonya back with interest.

Things went south when Kobe got word from one of his guys back in Chicago that he saw Sonya out and about, hugged up on some other nigga. This particular friend, Chauncy, ironically was a Chicago police officer who also moonlighted as a private investigator. He did his due diligence, took some pictures of Sonya "in action" and sent them back to Kobe. Once Kobe confronted Sonya about the allegations, the two pretty much broke it off. But it didn't end there…

Kobe was somewhat of the fool-hearted type and when he came back to Chicago for a visit, he found himself meandering back to Sonya. Guess her sex was super-convenient. They pretty much agreed to fuck each other with no real attachments. He'd come back and forth to Chicago, the two would fuck each other's brains out and then part ways. That was it…that was until she got pregnant.

Since then, she was on his ass, swearing up and down he was the one who got her pregnant with Kobe Jr. At first, Kobe presumed the kid was his, but when he did the math and calculated her time of conception, Kobe knew he could not have been the father. By that point, he was already in Ethiopia.

Now that he was back in Chicago, aside from helping his mother deal with her illness, he also needed to deal with Sonya. He tried his best to assuage her so she could leave him alone for good. But, of course, she wasn't going. AT ALL! Her nutty behind wanted to get married ASAP and demanded that he move in with her. Of course, common sense quickly informed him that it was a wrong move to do such. On top of that, he was now with Lacey.

Holding his phone, he continued to sit on the toilet pondering his next move. He closed his eyes, took a deep breath and then exhaled knowing what he needed to do. It was the *right* thing to do. He had to come clean immediately and tell Lacey the full truth. The last thing he wanted was for her to find out that he misled her and had a psycho ex-skeleton in his closet. Thankfully, it was the only skeleton, but he

felt so stupid and shameful for lying to Lacey about the reality of his situation with Sonya.

Kobe tightened his lips, stood up from the toilet seat and stared at himself for a minute in the bathroom mirror. He was trying his best to conjure up the right words to say. Once he formulated the most apologetic statement he could give, he somewhat braced himself for the next possibility – Lacey would kick him to the curb. He washed his hands and then made his way back into the kitchen. Dessert was thawed out by now.

"Stomach feel better now?" Lacey asked as she sat on the living room couch. She was watching television.

"Yeah…Look, Lacey, I have something to tell you. And I will understand completely if you are mad at me."

Her eyes turned to curious slits. "What's up?" she asked as she made his way over to the kitchen.

"I lied to you."

Chapter Thirty-Nine

Veteran corrections officer Lieutenant Alton "Smoke" Jackson pulled into the parking garage of the massive Downtown federal jail. He parked his '92 shiny white Cadillac El Dorado in his favorite spot. The burly officer then got out and stood by his car for a moment so he could finish his Newport.

The mix of honking traffic, wind gusts and echoes of sirens filled the garage as the Lieutenant took a final, long drag from the cigarette.

Thick smoke streamed from his thick purple lips and his nostrils. He flicked the still burning cigarette butt to the garage's floor. His beady eyes transformed into a crooked gaze as he proceeded to make his way inside the jail.

Usually, the Lieutenant would've spent his days off getting his big dick sucked by one of his many side pieces (yes, he was married) or he'd drive out to Indiana to go gambling at the Horseshoe Casino. But when Lil Paul, a former gang associate of his back in the day, requested his services for a new a 'job', the obviously corrupt and murderous jail guard was ready to clock back into work so he could get his other *job* started ASAP. And that job entailed getting rid of Lexy's snitching ass on behalf of Derron Harrington, Inmate #MC24542. So with no time to lose and $100k on the line, the Lieutenant quickly called up his supervisor and got some last minute overtime hours.

By now, it was slowly approaching ten pm. The Lieutenant clocked in and then proceeded up to the guard's break lounge. Before he got his overnight shift started, Lieutenant needed to quench his stomach growls with two honey buns from the vending machine. Once he devoured the sugary snacks, he strolled down to the fifth level of the jail – Derron's temporary residence.

~

"Sup, Brady…," Lieutenant announced as he coolly walked up to Officer Brady Judson's desk at the B-Wing of the fifth floor.

Officer Judson, a young, white dude, was sitting down reading a

sports magazine when he heard the familiar mature voice. He glanced up and saw Alton's face and flaunted a wide grin. "Lieutenant! What's going on, bro?"

"Sup, Judson!" Alton smiled back. "Just decided to do some last minute overtime. You good tonight?" he asked.

"Yeah! Everything's all good," said Officer Judson. He paused for a moment and then said, "Well, we did have an inmate who had to be rushed to the infirmary though."

"Who was that?" the Lieutenant raised a brow out of suspicion.

"Derron Harrington. He just passed out in the cell. Was vomiting blood and shit all over the place. It was crazy as hell, bro…"

FUCK, FUCK, FUCK, FUCK! Alton thought as his eyes widened out of fear that he was about to lose his $100k. *If that Derron nigga is dead I'm gonna be fuckin' pissed!* he thought. "What the fuck happened? Is he alive?"

"I don't know, sir."

"When did this shit happen?"

"Ehh, I think like an hour ago. Pacino was the one who heard someone scream for help."

"FUCK!" Alton blurted out and shook his head, somewhat losing his cool. He quickly tightened his lips and regained his composure once he realized his reaction was a bit weird.

"What's wrong, sir?" Officer Judson asked with a raised a brow.

"Nothing. Sorry. I had to check on him. His bond hearing is coming up I believe and Captain wanted me to make sure he was ready for tomorrow."

"Damn, why would he ask that."

"Ehh, he's a high security risk." The lies were coming out nonstop but his last statement didn't make any sense to Officer Judson. Although the white guard was a rookie and only had been on the job for less than two years, he could tell something was off. Lieutenant Jackson wasn't making any sense.

"I'm confused," Officer Judson said. Alton smiled and replied with, "Don't worry about it. You're still learning."

"I guess…Well, nothing else is going on. Same as usual."

"Good. I'll check in later. Let Pacino know that I'm here if you see him again."

"Gotcha!" Officer Judson grinned and threw his naïve eyes back to the Sports Illustrated magazine. Alton strolled off and made his way to the infirmary.

~

"Hey, Alton! Long time, no see! How's it going?" an older black nurse

asked the Lieutenant as he made his way up front to a nurse's station inside of the prison hospital.

He glanced down at the Oprah Winfrey-lookalike and replied with, "What's going on witchu, Gloria?!? I ain't seen you forever, too!" He smiled and leaned over the counter to give the nurse a light hug. They embraced each other and then Alton asked, "There's an inmate here by the name of Derron Harrington, right?"

Nurse Gloria's smile turned flat and she said, "Yeah, chile. He's messed up big time."

"What's wrong with him?"

Gloria smacked her teeth and looked the other way. "Boy, you got me fucked up. That's a HIPAA violation! I can't tell you that! You gon get me fired! But why you wanna know if he's here? Ya'll found some contraband and what not?" she replied as she ran her fingers through some medical files on her desk.

Then it hit Alton…He suddenly came up with an idea. "Can't say… Contraband raids are private as well," the Lieutenant joked. "You gon get me fired!"

"Boy, whatever!!!"

"I'm for real," Alton joked. "Shit, you might be fuckin' one of these muhfuckas on the low and giving them the scoop…" Alton lifted himself up off the station's countertop and knocked twice. A shady, devious smile came across his face and then he made his way back to the B-Wing.

~

By now it was almost one AM in the morning when an army of corrections officers flooded the B-Wing. Nothing but the sound of their rapid, marching thumps could be heard throughout. The officers, most of them men with the exception of two, moved in disciplined unison with Lieutenant Alton as their head. Once he marched the squad of jail guards inside the corridor where Derron's cell was at, he turned on all the lights and began screaming to wake all the inmates up.

"EVERYBODY! WAKE UP! CONTRABAND SEARCH! YOU ALREADY KNOW WHAT THE DRILL IS! OUT OF THE BED. TO THE WALL! HANDS UP! NO ONE LOOKING!"

The jail guards, one by one, made their way to each and every cell and opened them all up. Every single inmate slowly arose out of their slumber and fell in line to the Lieutenant's command.

Although most of the inmates were visibly pissed, not too many grunts and complaints came from them. Lieutenant Alton was a vicious, ruthless beast of a jail guard, so the inmates had a crystal-clear understanding not to get too slick with their mouths. Just go

along with his protocol and you'd be fine. Lieutenant Alton had a reputation for not tolerating side comments. Sarcastic commentary that carried even the slightest degree of displeasure with the Lieutenant's drills would have your ass you'd waking up in a coma.

Once all the inmates were lined up against the wall, the officers began flipping over mattresses, searching for anything illegal like drugs, makeshift weapons, banned books and magazines, cell phones, etc.

Alton, quiet and holding his elbows, stood off to the side already knowing what the inevitable consequence of the search was going to be. Within three minutes, one of the guards, Tom, an older fat white man, came dashing out of Derron's cell with a small phone in his hand. "Look at what I found, Lieutenant. Looks like Mr. Harrington here snuck in a lil celly celly!"

"Wow….Why am I not surprised?" Lieutenant Alton replied shaking his head. Tom handed the Lieutenant the phone. Once the guards continued their search, Alton went back to his office to go "file a report".

Chapter Forty

Earlier that night…

"Lied to me about what?" Lacey probed in a slightly weird tone. She threw a curious gaze at Kobe and her eyes transformed into investigative slits.

Kobe didn't say anything at first. He just stood there and tried to formulate the right words to say. He could even hear from her tone that this was revelation was going to be bad. His muscles tensed and slight nausea began to bubble in his core.

Lacey got up from the couch and sauntered toward Kobe. She was still wracked with disbelief over Mrs. Scott's sudden death. Compound that with all the craziness going with Lexy and Derron, fretful Lacey didn't know if she had the mental capacity to deal with more unexpected drama. Was the beginning of some more bullshit? she wondered.

"Look, I fucked up but I can explain," Kobe confessed as he threw his hands up in the air. Then, out of shame, he lowered his head, took a deep breath and exhaled knowing that he needed all the energy in the world to let this particular confession roll off his tongue. He lifted his head up, lightly tugged Lacey into his embrace and stared deeply into her doe eyes. "I never wanna hurt you…"

Lacey was silent. She stared back into Kobe's eyes and she could tell something as seriously bothering him. "Fucked up about what, babe? Just say it…" Lacey folded her arms and scanned him up and down. "You're making me nervous right now, Kobe," she voiced.

"Well, I know you're gonna be done with me after I say this but I…" Kobe froze and lowered his head again. He knew what he was about to tell her wasn't just an ordinary white lie – it was a bald-faced lie – a deceitful omission that was for sure going to possibly derail the blossoming of this lost-but-now-found new love with Lacey.

Truth be told, he could've just kept his mouth shut and not revealed anything. But with Sonya threatening him and being adamant that her son was his, he needed to go ahead and let everything out. Shit, the last thing he wanted was for Lacey to be caught up in his unnecessary bullshit and drama. She didn't deserve it, especially considering all the madness she'd been experiencing over the last few weeks or so.

When Kobe came back to Chicago, he truthfully never anticipated that he'd get back with Lacey. But the universe obviously thought differently; fate landed them back into each other's lives. And now it seemed like it was just a matter of time before they both had titles of

boyfriend and girlfriend. For that reason alone, Kobe felt ashamed and disgusted with himself he didn't disclose upfront the reality of what he had going on with Sonya.

Although in the past Kobe could be sneaky and not necessarily honest with his intentions at times, he definitely wasn't that type of guy. This past few weeks really had him on the cusp of cementing a real, genuine relationship with Lacey. His feelings and emotions for her were deep enough where he understood that she had the right to know about this precarious situation with Sonya. She also deserved to know the truth so that way she could quickly determine whether or not she felt comfortable being in a relationship with him. He loved her that much that regardless if she stayed with him or not, he knew to tell her was after all the right thing to do. But now with the possibility of this new love slipping away, he regretted not being honest upfront. All along, his shaky intuition told him to be truthful but he betrayed his own intuition. Now he had to deal with the consequences of such betrayal. Hopefully, Lacey would be understanding once he gave her a full explanation.

"Just say what you're gonna say, Kobe!" Lacey bellowed.

"I should've just been honest and upfront with you, but I—"

Buzz. Buzz. Buzz. Buzz.

Kobe froze and pursed his lips tight. Was this a sign? he wondered. Lacey felt her phone vibrating in her back pocket. She pulled it out and glanced down at the name. "Hold on for a sec, this is Mr. Scott calling me back," she said and quickly answered the phone. "Hey, Mr. Scott…"

"Hey, Lacey, this isn't my dad! This is Mike…My dad just had a heart attack!"

"What?!?" Lacey screamed and suddenly clasped her mouth. "What do you mean?!? I just got off the phone with him!"

"I know! It just happened! We're rushing him down to the hospital ASAP! I just wanted to give you a call and let you know what is happening!"

"What hospital are you all taking him, too?" Lacey asked as by now heavy tears streamed down her face.

"Rush University!"

"OKAY! I'm coming right now! I'm so sorry about all this, Mike! I'll be down there ASAP!" she balled and trembled with the phone glued to her ear.

"What's wrong?" Kobe whispered with a widened gaze. Lacey didn't respond. She hung up the phone and dashed into the apartment's kitchen. "Mr. Scott just had a heart attack! This is just too much! Like what the hell!" Lacey cried. Flustered and even more confused, she scrambled her kitchen looking for her car keys and

purse. “We gotta go now! They are taking him to Rush University! Like Oh My God! I just hope he’s okay! This is just too much! FUCK!”

“Shit! Damn, man!” Kobe growled as he dashed into the kitchen and saw Lacey was about to collapse. He ran up to her and grabbed her before she fell to the ground. “Lacey! Come on! It’s gonna be alright! I got you!” Kobe tried to quickly console.

Although he was on the cusp of admitting the truth about his past relationship with Sonya, all he could do at the moment was keep his mouth shut and run Lacey down to the hospital. He figured now wasn’t the time to drop the bombshell. He’d do it later but now he just needed to make sure Lacey was okay.

Kobe helped Lacey up off the kitchen floor and then walked her over to a couch in the living room. “Here! Have a seat! I’ll go get your stuff! It’s in the back, right?”

“I’m so nauseous right now,” Lacey slurred as she held her head shaking it.

“Come on, Lacey! I got you! Please don’t pass out on me! Please!” Kobe pleaded as he scrambled the living room looking for his keys. Once he found them, he dashed back over to Lacey. “Let’s go!” he said as he helped Lacey up and then the two of them made their way to the hospital.

~

Lacey, Kobe and the entire Scott family were silent and frozen with fear as they impatiently waited for some news in regards to Mr. Scott’s condition. Lacey shivered with anxiety as she kept her eyes glued to her cell phone and saw that it was almost three AM in the morning.

“Hey, guys…Everything is gonna be okay. Mr. Scott just had a severe panic attack. We’re giving him some rounds of lorazepam and some other anti-anxiety meds to help keep his nerves down,” some short, chubby young Indian doctor announced as he strolled into the waiting area with a clipboard in his hand.

Gasps and hallelujahs filled the room as everyone felt sudden relief from the doctor’s news.

“Thank God!” Mike, Mr. Scott’s son said shaking his head. Although the mood was still stiff and dark given that Mrs. Scott passed away not too long ago, everyone seemed to be elevated hearing that Mr. Scott himself didn’t suffer from the same dreadful fate.

“Thank you, Jesus!!!” Lacey purred. Kobe was sitting next to her side and rubbed her leg to console her. “Told you everything was gonna be alright, babe.”

Lacey glanced over at Kobe. “I know…I just…It’s just a lot going on,” she replied. “Anyways, so earlier, you were about to tell me

something about you lied…"

Kobe pursed his lips and scanned the lounge. Everyone else got quiet and looked at Lacey and him. "Can I talk to you in private for a sec?" Kobe muttered. "Sure," Lacey responded. The both of them then stood up and made their way out to a private corner of the corridor near the waiting room.

The two were now alone. "So, what's up?" Lacey asked with her arms folded.

"Look, Lacey, I should've just been upfront and told you the truth about my situation. The truth is I lied to you about my relationship status."

"Wait. What do you mean?" Lacey raised a brow and continued to keep a heavy gawk onto Kobe. I knew it! It was just too fucking good to be true! she thought.

Kobe lowered his head out of shame. "I'm sorry if this is not what you wanna hear and I feel pathetic as fuck saying this but I had been seeing someone off and on here for years….Her name is Sonya."

Lacey didn't say anything. She just kept her unblinking eyes latched to Kobe's face. She didn't know how to exactly process what he just said but she needed more clarification. "Wait, what do you mean you've been seeing someone? Like now?"

"No. I cut it off with her sometimes but when I came back to Chicago, I had to see her because…"

"Because what…"

Kobe froze and tightened his lips once more. "She claims I have a son by her. She even named him after me. It's not mine though—"

Suddenly Lacey twisted her face and looked Kobe up and down. "Are you fucking kidding me right now?!? Wait. You know what…You don't need to say anything else. I'm done. Just leave. You're right. You are a liar. A fucking liar. You should've just said something instead of stringing me on."

"Lacey, look, I'm sorry! I just didn't expect us to reconnect like this! Shit was just moving so fast!"

"Exactly! FAST! And I fell fast and stupid for your shit! AHH! I should've known!"

By now Lacey's face reddened with anger and a tear escaped her eye. But this wasn't a tear out of sorrow or loss, but a tear of rage. She was ready to fuck Kobe up for playing with her emotions, especially considering the rollercoaster of events that happened over the last few weeks or so with Derron. Why would Kobe even wait 'til now to say something about his 'situationship'? she wondered. "Why the fuck are you just telling me this shit?!? Like, you know what…I'm done. Just leave. Have a nice life, Kobe! I can't be with a fucking liar!"

Without hesitation, Lacey spun on her heels and tried to walk off

but Kobe grabbed her and grumbled, “Really?!? Lacey! I’m sorry! Look, I’m gonna—”

“Get your fucking hands off me!” Lacey interrupted and shouted. Her yell quickly caught the attention of a nurse from afar. “Everything alright?” the nurse said as she looked at the two with slight concern. She slowly stood up from her desk and asked, “Do I need to get security, ma’am?”

Kobe and Lacey looked at the concerned older white nurse. “Nah, I’m cool…,” Lacey growled. An evil scrunch plastered her face and then she scanned Kobe up and down. “This lying asshole isn’t though.” She quickly yanked her arm away from Kobe. “Just leave the hospital and don’t call or text me again you lying motherfucker...” She spun around and walked back to the waiting area.

“Lacey…I’m sorry,” Kobe mumbled fighting back tears with his arms wide open. “Guess I gave love a try,” he said as he turned around and left the hospital.

Chapter Forty-One

"Derron…Derron…You feelin' better, boy? Them meds got you feelin' right?" Nurse Gloria, the MCC nurse, laughingly asked as she hovered her portly self over Derron. He was lying in a hospital bed, his hands chained to its rails. As her soft Chicago West Side accented voice rolled into his ears, he slowly opened his eyes and glanced over at the nurse.

For the past few days or so, he had been pumped with all types of meds. Painkillers. Antiviral therapies. Chemo. The nigga had all types of shit injected up into him. Some of the medications had him so sedated that at times, although he was conscious, he was completely disassociated from his mind and body.

Nurse Gloria then marched over to the hospital room window. She pulled its thick light-blocking purple curtains back, immediately letting intense sunlight from this luminous Wednesday morning radiate the cold, latex glove-smelling prison hospital room.

The lightly was elevating but partly blinding. So, Derron struggled to see what Nurse Gloria was doing inside the room. The pouring sunshine also exaggerated Derron's mental haziness.

He had no idea what had happened or what he did to land himself in the hospital. He'd been fasting since he arrived at MCC. Since being locked up, he had all the inmates looking at him as if he was crazy over his fasting routine. But in his mind, he refused to eat what he thought was some shit worse than dog food. Maybe it was the water he'd been drinking because certainly he knew he would have not gotten food poisoning. *Maybe some nigga inside the cell had some virus and that shit was going around?* he pondered for a sec and then drifted back off into LaLaLand. That high-grade hospital pharmaceutical dope was doing the damn thing on his system.

"Wh-whhhatt hap-ha-pened? What time is it?" he asked in a slow stutter, his mouth dry like the Saharah desert from not taking in enough fluids. The meds were dehydrating him, too, so the Nurse had a heavy electrolyte IV drip running into his arms 24/7.

"Oh, just sit still and just relax, boy. Don't get yourself all worked up," said Nurse Gloria said with a big ass smile. She made her way

back over toward Derron so she could increase his morphine dosage running concurrently with his saline drip.

Derron's gaze widened and just as he was about to wipe his eyes to get clearer vision he realized his wrists were chained to the rails of the bed. He scanned the room and looked up at a small circular clock near the window. It was about eleven AM in the morning.

"Boy, you been in and out of it for the past few days or so. It's Wednesday morning."

"Damn, I've been in here this long?" Derron asked then yawned.

"Yup! You gon be in here longer, too…," Nurse Gloria said.

Derron raised a brow. "Why?"

"The doctor will tell you soon. She'll be in a sec," Nurse Gloria said as she checked Derron's EKG machine. "Looks like you're all stable though. Like I said, Dr. Pirtle will be in a moment…"

Soon as she said that, within seconds, a young, brown-skinned female doctor with a head full of shoulder length peppery curly hair made her way into the room. "Mr. Harris, how's it going?" she smilingly probed as she ran her eyes across a medical chart in her clipboard.

"What happened to me?" he simply asked again in a low and slurred voice.

The short and thick-framed doctor raised her brow and pursed her lips. She stared at Derron then shook her head. "Well, do you want the good news or the bad news first?"

"Ummm," Derron mumbled and didn't know how to respond. Truth be told, he instantly came back to his senses realizing he was currently locked up in a federal jail and that Lexy's ass was supposed to be got by now. He was also supposed to bond out and then eventually execute the rest of his plan and dip out of the US.

He clenched his fists and the sound the handcuffs clinking echoed throughout the room.

"Well….," Dr. Pirtle said with her right brow raised anticipating his answer.

"I don't know…," Derron mumbled.

"Well, I tell you the good news first, sir…" The doctor looked down at her clipboard and said, "You're getting out tomorrow. You're a free man."

"Huh? What you mean?" Derron said with a twisted face.

"Well, that's because of the bad news…"

"And what's that?" Derron asked and then gulped.

"Derron – I hate to break it to you but you have stage 4 pancreatic cancer. You have about five months to live…You're getting sent to an outpatient hospice pretty soon…I, ughh, we've been trying to notify any family you have but you didn't have any listed…"

“Wait…This is a joke, right? Like you got the wrong person confused?”

“No…Not at all, Derron. I’m sorry for everything, sir. I don’t want to say that your diagnosis is a complete death sentence. You can still opt to receive treatments. The hospice might even discuss some other options with you if you have the funds to do so, but at this point, this is where we’re at…I’m sorry,” the doctor explained as she flipped through some paperwork on her clipboard. “Do you have any additional questions for me?”

“Doctor…I…Wait….I’m dying?” Derron asked no longer stuttering. The truth was setting in and it was sobering him up. Adrenaline began to ramp up in his body and he could feel himself on the verge of having a breakdown. “This…This can’t be real,” he said as his face began to scrunch in pain and anxiety. “I’m dying?”

“Ohhh, Derron, don’t cry. I know this is hard. We can get a counselor here to help you deal with this. You want me to do that?”

“No. NO! I’m dying? Wait? I’m really dying?”

“Derron…Yes. I’m sorry. I’ll let you have some time to yourself to process everything, okay?” Dr. Pirtle then spun around and quickly walked out of the room.

By now, Derron was silent and nothing but the sound of the EKG machine chirping could be heard in the room. Derron looked around for a second and then moved his legs to see if this truly was real and not another PTSD-induced nightmare of his. “Fuck! FUCK! FUCK!” he blurted out as tears fell from his strained, hazy eyes.

He tried to rip himself free from the bed but he was fighting against steel. If he wasn’t so heavily medicated and weak, he would’ve tapped into everything he had inside of him to break himself free. He’d do it too, even if it meant that he would lacerate his wrists and arms and possibly break a few bones. Shit, at this point he’d rather deal with the loss of his hands than his entire life.

Realizing he couldn’t fight anymore, his attempt to break free from his chains subsided. He collapsed into the bed and then just turned his gape toward the still-chirping EKG. He observed his heart rate go up and down and listened to the nonstop melody that one day he knew would cease to exist. This cancer diagnosis was the last thing he expected. Being in prison for the rest of one’s life was daunting indeed but dying, and dying so soon, was another. Derron didn’t anticipate he’d go out this way. Not at all. Crazy thing was, he knew pancreatic cancer ran in his family, so the diagnosis to a degree didn’t truly come as a surprise.

“God, save me...Please, just give me another chance,” he prayed as tears slipped his years. “I promise I won’t do no more crazy stuff, Lord. I promise” He begged and pleaded with God until he slipped

back into sleep.

~

The faint sound of slurps and spitting lightly echoed through Lieutenant Alton's office. Yes, he was that type of dude who didn't give a fuck as to where, when, and what time of day it was in order to get a nut out.

Depending on his shift and mood, he often could sneak Tanisha, another jail guard, inside of his office and the two would fuck each other's brains out for lunch and then return back to work. The jail guard wasn't fucking Tanisha or getting head from her on this late morning though. She had today off unfortunately, so Alton had a back-up plan. He was actually sitting back in his cheap office desk seat casually watching some thick redbone porn actress on some random amateur PornHub video give some nigga head on his iPhone. "Damn, lil mama suckin' the skin off that shit," Alton moaned as he stroked himself.

He didn't give a fuck that he was rubbing one out in his office. He suddenly found himself horny and needed to relieve himself. Some minutes passed and once he busted his nut into a napkin, he cleaned himself up. He pulled out some air freshener to rid the smell of fresh thick nut in the office. Once he got rid of evidence of his perverted wrongdoing, he stood up and grabbed a plastic evidence bag that contained Derron's burner cell phone.

Alton came up with an alternative plan. Fuck $100k. He wanted $200k. He was going to run up to Derron's room and extort him out of more money if he wanted the *job* to be completed. But just as he was about to walk out of the office to begin phase two of his corrupt mission, two knocks came to his office door.

"Who is it?" he blurted out. He roamed to the door and opened it. Two white guys wearing business suits and ties stood solemnly at the door. One of the men drew his jacket back and flashed an FBI badge that beamed from the left-center of his belt. "FBI. You're under arrest, sir…"

"What?!?" Alton froze with confusion.

"Turn around…Place your hands behind your back, sir," said one of the agents as they rush him toward a wall and slapped handcuffs on his thick wrists.

~

"Girl, how'd he take it?" Nurse Gloria asked as Dr. Pirtle made her way back over to the nurse's station. Both of the women looked

concerned because they could hear Derron wailing and sobbing uncontrollably. They somewhat expected that reaction though, so Dr. Pirtle instructed Nurse Gloria earlier to ramp up the morphine in his IV. And that was exactly what she did just some time ago before Dr. Pirtle delivered that unfortunate news to Derron.

"Morphine finally kickin' in it seems," Dr. Pirtle said as she shook her head. She handed Nurse Gloria her clipboard and then checked to see if she still had her stethoscope around her neck. "I gotta go run and check on Townsend down in 3B. Call Dr. Gupta and tell him that we need to refer him to a cardiologist because I think he has left ventricular heart failure," Dr. Pirtle said.

"Got it," Nurse Gloria replied as she took the medical paperwork off the clipboard Dr. Pirtle handed to her and then filed it away. "Oh, girl, I got some tea to tell you by the way!"

"What's that?" Dr. Pirtle said.

"Girl, you know Alton, right?"

"Alton, Alton, Alton…Big Alton? Lieutenant, right?"

"Yeah, girl, the FBI just over to the men's wing and did a sweep. Said that they busted up a ring of officers involved in selling drugs and shit to prisoners!!!"

"What?!? Alton?!?! He got kids and shit! And a wife!"

"Girl, tell me about it! And apparently, they got his ass on a whole bunch of shit. I don't know the exact details yet. But, ooh chile, it's a whole bunch of them going down. They cleaning up house! I hope we got our shit straight!" Nurse Gloria laughed.

"Shit, we better! I ain't getting my pretty ass locked up! Not with these crazy hoes that run this mothafucka," Dr. Pirtle giggled. "Anyways, girl, let me go check on this dude and then run my ass to lunch. What you eatin' today?"

"Girl, I got some leftovers from Popeye's."

"Damn! You just made me hungry. Anyways, I'll be back." Dr. Pirtle stormed off. Nurse Gloria threw her gaze back onto a mound of paperwork sitting before her.

"I do not feel like dealin' with this shit," she complained and tossed Derron's medical file off to the side. She looked over at another nurse who was sitting with her at the station. "Jackie, I'mma go take a cigarette break for a minute. Come file these patient files for me," she said.

Jackie spun around in her seat and walked over to Nurse Gloria's section. "Okay," replied and then began to file away. She picked up Derron's patient file folder and briefly opened it. She briefly scanned the file but didn't realize the name read "HARRIS, DERRON".

Chapter Forty-Two

A week had passed.

Alexandria ogled herself in a mirror of her rehab bedroom as she ran a comb through her hair. Today, on this gloomy, rainy fall Saturday, she was scheduled to attend her mother's funeral services. Only for a couple of hours though. Once the funeral was over, she was required to head back to rehab.

Since getting into trouble, Alexandria hadn't heard not a single word from her entire family or her friends. Except cousin Missy, though. For the most part, no one wanted to have shit to do with her. Not even Lacey.

Everyone pretty much abandoned her. Why? Honestly, they didn't even know who this woman was. Hell, Lexy didn't even know who she was herself.

Lexy missed her best friend so much, too. She wanted to talk to her so bad and tell her everything. However, per her plea agreement, she pretty much couldn't say shit to a single soul about Derron and what exactly happened and how she got to this point. Her and Derron's cases were a part of a larger sealed indictment to take down the Russian Mafia in Chicago.

She continued to stare at herself in the mirror wondering how she let everything just spiral out of control. First, it started with her ravenous addiction to getting nonstop attention from men. Lexy was a serial dater and would go on date after date, meeting and even fucking men who she truly had no business messing with in the first place.

She was a middle-class girl but always had a thing for bad boys and guys who roamed the streets. Occasionally, she'd even mess with married men for the thrill of it. But when she found herself caught up in the crosshairs of some side chick drama, she opted to just stick with "regular" guys. Hence, Derron. But little did she know what trouble even a *regular* guy could bring…

Still staring at herself, she wished she never went on that date that night with Derron. She'll never forget either. It was about two years ago and she was bored out of her mind. She'd recently stopped

messing with some married man and vowed to practice celibacy indefinitely until she could find Mr. Right. Thirty days later, a pulsating sex drive drove her into reneging on her vow of indefinite celibacy. She went out to a club and ran into Derron. Truth be told, he was just supposed to be a one night stand. But his thrilling sex had her coming back for seconds…and thirds.

Lexy never told Lacey about her hookup with Derron. And truthfully, she never divulged A LOT about her relationships with other men. She was very careful and strategic not to tell Lacey everything. And the number one reason why was because she feared her judgment and criticism. Lexy also always perceived Lacey being somewhat of a non-risk taking, boring person.

But now she regretted she hadn't told bestie. Perhaps Lacey's cautionary and judging attitude would've had her second-guessing Derron and his motivations. Which was another thing – Lexy was still trying to grapple as to how she even let Derron charm and snake his way into getting her to do dirt.

Lexy realized now all along Derron was pretty much high-level pimping her. Exploiting both her body and her mind to get her to do what he wanted for his own personal betterment.

Drugs. Finessing. Fraud. You name it, Lexy had probably seen it or done it. In the course of two years, she went from being a young, black professional woman to a cocaine-addicted finesser and prostitute slaving for a white collar criminal with severe mental issues.

Lacey had so much she needed to tell, so much she needed to say about the depth of her secretive, dark relationship with Derron Yeah, he was thrilling. More so a thrilling nightmare. But she had to keep hush.

Perhaps her situation would be a lot different right now if Lexy was more open. But she was open now alright. Open and raw, bleeding profusely from her soul. She still couldn't fathom her mother was gone. The last time she spoke to her, her mother was in complete tears. Last thing mother said was, *"Baby, just please, take care of yourself…"* Two days later, Mrs. Scott died.

As she continued running the comb through her hair, Lexy was almost ready to break down into tears. She didn't even know if she even had the strength to go to the funeral.

Knock! Knock!

Lexy's train of thought came to a halt when she heard two loud knocks on her bedroom door. "I'm coming," she said as she scrambled to finish putting on the rest of her outfit. She had on a basic black dress, stockings and matching shoes. One of her cousins who pitied her sent her the outfit through the mail so she could at least have something decent to put on for her mother's funeral.

Lexy, in heels, then attempted to dash toward the door and open it up. “Sorry,” she apologized and opened the door. A young Latino police officer with a short buzz cut pulled out some handcuffs and said, “You already know the drill.” Lexy followed suit and held her hands out. The officer slapped cuffs on her slender brown wrists and escorted her out of the facility and to a squad car. Once inside the car, they took off.

Some time passed. Lexy was staring out of the back passenger window of the cop car as it sped down Lake Shore Drive. The funeral services were slated to start at eleven and it was now approaching 10:50.

Officer Hernandez seemed pressed to make it to the South Side in a hurry. He cursed and yelled as he flew in and out of traffic. But Lexy didn’t seem unfazed by the fact that they were possibly running late – she was in a daze. She couldn’t believe that the chain of events that transpired over the last few months or so would inevitably lead to all of this, including the sudden, unexpected passing of her mother.

Her eyes were unblinking as she ogled the evidence of changing seasons outside. It was a chilly and overcast day, matching the despondency of what Lexy was feeling. She wasn’t allowed to attend the wake, so this was going to be the first time that she not only as going to see her family but also see her mother – in a casket.

“You okay back there?” Officer Hernandez asked as he stared at Lexy from the rear view mirror. She had been quiet the whole entire ride and he grew concerned that she was on the verge of having some sort of nervous breakdown.

“I’m okay,” Lexy replied keeping her eyes glued to the still, gray waters of Lake Michigan to her left. The skies were a mix of gray and blue as light drizzling poured from the somber skies. Trees by now were shedding their bright leaves and were nothing more than barren, decaying wooden posts.

“We’re almost there,” Officer Hernandez said as he got off the 47th street exit off Lake Shore Drive and hit east to get onto MLK Drive. The funeral services were being held at Mt. Pisgah Missionary Baptist Church, a historic South Side church. Once the church was in sight, Lexy could already see that there were hundreds of mourners lined up ready to enter the church.

“I don’t wanna go anymore,” Lexy grumbled.

“Huh? What are you talking about?” Officer Hernandez threw a scrunched gawk at Lexy. “We’re like right here…”

“I can’t go inside. I can’t do this. I killed my mama. I should be the one dead. I can’t go inside. I’m not ready for this.”

The squad car approached the church’s parking lot but Officer Hernandez didn’t pull in. He pulled along the curb and threw the car

in park. He turned around and said, “Ma’am…Are you sure you don’t want to do this? This is your mother’s funeral…”

Lexy looked out the window and attached her eyes to the crème-colored hearse parked out front. People, mostly dressed in black, slowly trickled into the church. “I’m sure. I can’t do this. We can go back.”

“Ma’am…I’m going to ask you one more time. Once I turn around, you do realize I won't be able to take you back…

Lexy thought for a moment and lowered her head. She looked back up at the hearse and shook her head out of disbelief. “Yeah, I’m sure. You can take me back. I can’t do this. I shouldn’t even be here. My mom should’ve been here. I was supposed to die.”

“Are you sure? Don’t you think you’re gonna regret this?”

“No.”

“Okay, then…” Officer Hernandez turned around, threw the car in drive and busted a U-turn to head back to the rehab.

~

“That was such a beautiful service. Mrs. Scott looked beautiful. I’m just so disappointed that Lexy didn’t even come to her own mother’s funeral. Have you tried to talk to her, baby?” Lacey’s mother asked as she, Lacey, her stepfather and some other mourners sat at a table inside the church’s cafeteria.

By now it was almost three pm and many people were still attending the repast. The smell of fried chicken, greens, macaroni and cheese and other southern delights wafted in the air. Typical for a black funeral repast. Lacey picked through a chicken wing drenched in hot sauce as she shook her head silently no. “I can’t talk to her. I thought about it but I can’t do it. I still can’t process everything. I don’t even know how to even get into contact with her,” Lacey said.

“What a shame…This is just crazy. Like, this is just so strange. I guess that’s how the world is sometimes. Everything just moves so fast and comes unexpectedly,” the mother voiced.

Mourners continued devouring fried chicken, chitlins, yellow rice and greens among din of their light chit-chat. Lacey was certain some people in the room were curious too as to why Lexy never showed up. And many people were also probably curious as to how her life suddenly spiraled out of control and no one saw any evidence that she was falling a part. She didn’t see the evidence either.

Lacey and her family continued to talk until out of the corner of her eye she saw Kobe make his entrance into the cafeteria. Lacey looked the other way and exhaled out of fear that he would make his way over to the table and say something to her and her parents. And

of course, since he was a respectful, dapper gentleman, he did just that.

"Mrs. Franklin. Mr. Paul," said Kobe looking directly at Lacey's parents. He then turned his attention toward Lacey and said, "Nikki… How are you?" Kobe announced with a light smile. He deliberately used an old nickname he gave her years ago. Lacey wasn't flattered. She kept her eyes away from him, pretending as if she was distracted by something else. For a second, her mother picked up on the weird vibe but didn't say anything.

"Hey, Kobe! So nice to see you! I saw you earlier and meant to say something but you were talking to the family. Come sit down," Mrs. Franklin said and beckoned Kobe to come sit in a seat in between her and Lacey.

"I think Tashiana is sitting there, mother," Lacey said in a somewhat concerned tone as she suddenly looked at the empty seat. Lacey was doing the most now.

Lacey's mother scrunched her face. "Girl, Tashiana over there talkin' to some people. Come sit down, Kobe," Mrs. Franklin laughed. Lacey hadn't told her mother about the little rekindled-but-quickly-killed fling her and Kobe had over the past few weeks. But Lacey's awkward body language was giving her vibes that possibly something went down between them.

Kobe looked at Lacey strangely for a sec and then back at Mrs. Franklin. "Sure," he said and sat down.

Suddenly Lacey rose to her feet and said, "I'm gonna go get something to drink. You want anything, mom and dad?"

"I'm good, baby," Mrs. Scott replied with a raised brow. "I'm good, too, baby doll," her stepfather said.

Lacey walked off. Mrs. Scott looked at Kobe and already knew what could've been happening. "So…When ya'll started dating again?" she asked bluntly.

Kobe looked down and smiled shaking his head. "How'd you know?"

"Boy, you might've left years ago, but I know you and Lacey long enough to know when y'all done did something. And besides, you don't think I was once your age? And Lacey actin' all strange. Shoot. Ya'll better get it together. That's all I'mma say…"

Kobe chuckled. He stood up and meandered over to where he saw Lacey talking to a relative. Without hesitation, he leaned into the conversation and said, "Can I talk to you for a second?"

"I really have nothing to say to you," Lacey quickly replied.

The relative of Mrs. Scott, an older black woman, said, "I'm gonna leave y'all be," then she walked off.

Lacey looked at Kobe and said, "Why are you even here?"

“Ummm…. To pay my respects?”

“True…,” Lacey said feeling somewhat caught off-guard. For a second she knew she was being a bit irrational. Truth was, she was kind of low-key thinking that she overreacted when he confessed the truth about Sonya. “But I told you I didn’t want to talk to you ever again. Goodbye.” Lacey then turned around and walked off.

She made her way back over to her mother and stepfather and sat down. Her mother looked over at her and said, “He’s a good guy. Stop trippin’.”

Chapter Forty-Three

"*He's a good guy. Stop trippin'.*" Lacey couldn't believe her mother would have the audacity to let those words roll so seamlessly off her tongue, especially considering there were still in the middle of the repast. She looked at her mother and rolled her eyes. "And what makes you think I'm trippin'? You don't even know what happened," she whispered, her tone projecting slight annoyance at her mother's seemingly off remark.

Her mother didn't relent though. "Well, what happened?" she asked.

"Well, since we are now having that discussion, just know he lied to me and told me he wasn't seeing anyone. But then he told me last week he lied and he had been seeing someone off and on and may have gotten her pregnant."

"Damn…" Lacey's stepfather shook his head.

No one said anything at first. But then Lacey's mother asked, "Well, is it his kid?"

"Hell if I know," Lacey said shrugging her shoulders.

"Girl, watch your mouth. We in the church!"

"Sorry…"

"Anyways…Did you at least let him explain? I mean, I get it. No one wants to be lied to. But did you at least hear him out? Why did he lie about it?"

"I don't know."

"So, you just made a snap decision and didn't even let the man speak?"

"No."

"And you wonder why you ain't got no man…"

"Mom! That was rude!" Lacey snapped.

"That was kind of rude I will say," Lacey's stepfather agreed with Lacey.

Awkward silence came between the group but Lacey's mother was adamant in voicing her opinion.

"Yeah, it might be rude, but hell, it's somewhat the truth. Lacey, girl, it's rough out here in these streets. You better hear that man out

and see what's the real deal. Besides, come on, Lacey. This is Kobe. Not some street guy. Ya'll always loved each other. You know it. I know it. That's why you've always been holding out, never really committing yourself to any other man," Lacey's mother said, trying to reason with her daughter.

Then it hit Lacey – she knew her mother was right. She didn't even give Kobe a second chance. Didn't even give him a reason to fully explain himself. She rushed and panicked. Although to a degree she was justified in acting in such a way given all the craziness that went down between her, Lexy and Derron, she knew Kobe was a genuinely good guy and he deserved to at least be heard. She wasn't quite ready yet to change her mind all the way though. But Kobe needed to be heard.

"Okay," she said. "I guess you're right. I just don't want to be hurt again."

"I know, baby. I know…Let Ken go. He wasn't shit."

"Mom! You cursed!"

"I'm an elder. Certain things we can get away with." Lacey's parents then laughed in unison.

"You guys are funny…I love you all," Lacey said standing up and then went and hugged her parents. She pulled out her phone and shot Kobe a text. "Where are you?"

Seconds later he replied with, "In the parking lot about to head back…"

She quickly typed, "Don't leave yet. Can we talk?"

He texted back with swiftness – "Sure…I'm waiting."

Lacey made her way out into the somewhat still crowded church parking lot. "Fuck," she grunted when she realized she forgot what type of car Kobe was driving. It was cold and windy outside. Lacey clutched herself and scanned the parking lot until she saw headlights flashing. "Oh, that must be him," she said as the lights kept flashing trying to get her attention. Lacey quickly made her way to the car and then got into the front passenger seat.

Kobe glanced over at her said, "Lacey, look, I'm so sorry. Like I said, I can explain."

"Okay, go ahead."

"I met her some years ago. We were always off and on. Nothing serious. We got close but then she cheated on me while I was away." "When I'd come back to Chicago, foolish me though would still link up with her because I was just lonely."

"Really? Lonely? How? There are plenty of women out there…"

"Yeah, but I don't know…I just always never felt the edge to wanna go look."

"Why?"

“Because…None of the women I have ever met came as close to you. Never.”

Lacey felt flattered and she truly felt the same about Kobe.

“So, the kid though. That is not your child?”

“No. I’m certain of it. She keeps saying it’s mine but I doubt it. I was gone when she got pregnant.”

“Why didn’t you do a DNA test?”

Kobe shrugged his shoulders. “I just thought she kind of knew low-key that the kid was never mines and that she would inevitably drop it.”

“So, now that you’re back in Chicago, let me guess, she wants to get back with you?”

“Yeah…”

“I don’t know, Kobe. Like, I’m not going to lie. These past few weeks, as crazy as they were, they’ve also been great with you. But this – this just sounds like some drama I don’t even have the mental capacity to deal with.”

“I mean, I understand. I get it totally. Which is the reason why I wanted to tell you upfront to not continue to waste your time.”

Lacey paused for a moment and took a deep breath. She wondered if he was lying about anything else but she could tell from his body language that he was being as honest as possible. “Is there anything else you need to tell me?”

“No.”

“You swear?”

“I swear…”

Lacey paused once more and then said, “Look, I know I overreacted. I just don’t wanna get my feelings hurt. And if you are truly telling the truth about this Sonya woman, then I think we could be cool.”

“Thank you, Lacey,” Kobe smiled. “That is all I wanted. Was for you to at least hear me out.”

They looked at each other. Kobe then said, “If I could turn back the hands of time, I wish I would’ve never left Howard. I should’ve just stayed.”

“Why?”

“Because…I could’ve had all that time with you. I used to miss you so much over those years.”

Lacey felt the same way. They looked at each other for a few more seconds until Kobe reached in and planted a cheek on her forehead. He then stared down into her eyes and said, “I love you.”

“I love you, too,” she said. Then the two kissed.

Chapter Forty-Four

"Mr. Harrington! Today's your lucky day….I guess…"

Derron sat slumped in a wheelchair inside of a conference room when he raised his head to the sound of the serious voice that called his name. The man by now was a tragic sight to behold. His once muscular frame melted into a shadow of a frail man who now looked like death was around the corner.

Hundreds of milligrams of morphine and some fentanyl ran a marathon through his blood. The man could barely open his hazy, glassy eyes. But he managed to do so despite his eyelids feeling like they weighed a thousand pounds.

At first, he couldn't make out who called his name. But as his vision got somewhat clearer, he gawked at a tall, burly white man dressed in a dark blue suit.

The fortyish-looking white man had demeanor and build of a killer pitbull. He had a shiny bald head that glinted light from the office ceiling. Dude almost looked like Steve Wilkos, the bodyguard on Jerry Springer's show. But this scary-looking white guy wasn't a reality TV show actor – this was US Attorney Mark Madigan. He was the lead federal prosecutor on Derron's case.

Derron was at the Department of Justice's Chicago branch in Downtown Chicago. Nurse Gloria got his horribly anxious nerves good, right and ready before his departure from the MCC hospital. Hence, his wilted and collapsed appearance.

Today was his official release day and he was meeting with the prosecutor to go over the exact nature of his release details. Derron he hadn't known yet because he still going in and out of consciousness.

Since Derron was officially diagnosed with a terminal disease, the Feds decided to drop his entire case and let him die in a hospice facility. There was no point in wasting valuable tax dollars on a man who was going to be dead in a matter of months, if not weeks.

"Wake him up," the prosecutor growled to the medical assistant and police officer who stood on the sides of Derron inside of the office. The medical assistant, some short, older Latina woman shook Derron's shoulder. "Wake up, sir."

“Bring him over here so he can sign these papers and get the hell out of my office,” the US Attorney growled with anger. He was truly mad Derron was getting out. Granted, he was dying from cancer, but he’d rather him die a fast death behind bars than in a hospice. Unfortunately, his supervisor had a difference of opinion, hence his imminent release.

Derron though wasn’t in any type of celebratory mood. Since he found out his dreadful pancreatic diagnosis, not only was he in a daze from rounds of drugs, but in a daze of paranoia and fear that his days were numbered. The nurses at MCC had to load him up with rounds of anti-anxiety medications and narcotics to keep him sedated.

The medical assistant wheeled Derron over to get closer to the prosecutor. Attorney Madigan was sitting at the far end of the table near the entrance of the conference.

“Ye-yes,” Derron stuttered. He had slight drool running out of the corner of his lips.

Attorney Madigan scanned Derron up and down with a gaze of disgust. “He’s drooling. Wipe his fucking mouth,” he said as he angrily opened a manila folder and pulled out a piece of paper. It was an official letter of exoneration from the Department of Justice clearing Derron of any wrongdoing. The only condition to his release though was that he had to immediately relinquish all of his assets over to the government. They took every single damn dime the man had in his pocket. Even when Derron thought he could hide money in all of his different accounts, the Feds were able to eventually get to them.

Crazy thing was, Derron was so gone off the pain meds, he had no idea was *truly* going on. All he cared about at the moment was the fact that he was about to die any day now.

“Here’s your official letter of exoneration. I hope with the few remaining days you have left on this earth you spend every single second thinking about all of the havoc and bullshit you put people through. Motherfucker.” The prosecutor slid the letter over to Derron and stood up. He adjusted his suit and just as he was about to walk out of the conference room, he looked at Derron and said, “You’re such a disgrace to your kind. You could’ve been a good role model for your people. But you chose to be just like the rest of those thugs…” He walked and slammed the door behind him.

The prosecutor’s vicious words went through one ear and out the other. Derron, still loopy from the dope, just looked at the prosecutor in stroppy silence. He was still dressed in his MCC-issued jail uniform. He had a change of clothes waiting for him at St. Sabina Hospice Center down on 87th street. Luckily for Derron, Chicago had a free, low-cost hospice center that was willing to take him in and offer him palliative care.

“Okay, you got your letter now, let’s get you down to St. Sabina so they can take care of you, mmm-k?” the medical assistant said with a big, wide smile on her face, revealing a huge gap between her two front teeth.

“Oh-ohh-ok,” Derron stuttered still drooling.

Derron’s wheelchair was accompanied by a rolling IV machine that had the meds pumping through him. So, the medical assistant and the police officer together rolled Derron out of the conference room. Derron, although high as fuck, had enough understanding in him that he was about to be taken to what would inevitably be his final place here on Earth.

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About an hour later, Derron was transported to the St. Sabina Hospice Center.

The white medical transport van he was riding in pulled up to the curb of the hospice center. “We’re here, Mr. Derron. I’m gonna get you all settled,” the medical assistant voiced as she got quickly got out of the van and then proceeded to go get hospice staff to help with getting Derron inside.

Even with Derron still being doped the fuck up, he grew conscious of what was going on. The more aware he became, the more anxious he became once again. “I…I want my mama,” he mumbled. The driver of the van, some older Hispanic man with a big Super Mario mustache, turned around when he heard Derron’s muffled cry. “You good, bro?” he asked. “They are coming to get you soon. You in pain?”

Derron stared back at the man and a tear escaped his eye. Drool streamed from the corner of his mouth. “I want my mommy,” Derron purred. The van driver lightly shook his head and turned his gaze back to the entrance of the hospice. He had no idea what the fuck Derron was talking about. He even somewhat pitied him.

Moments later, the medical assistant along with a black Hospice worker emerged from the entrance of the facility and made their way over to the van. The medical assistant slid the door open and said, “Okay, Derron. We’re about to get you all settled, sir!”

The black hospice worker peered into the van and smiled at Derron. “Hey, Derron! I’m Cynthia! I’m gonna be your nurse…How you feelin’, baby?”

“He’s in and out of it,” the older Latina medical assistant commented.

“Oh, well, we gon’ take real good care of him! Just see, Mr. Derron. We gon make sure you have everything you need,” the

voluptuous hospice nurse said with a roaring laugh. “C’mon, baby, I got you.” Ms. Cynthia and the medical assistant got Derron out of the van and into the hospice center.

Once Ms. Cynthia got Derron’s belongings and his medical files, she took Derron into an adjacent hallway and down to a room that had already been prepared for him. Since Derron’s healthcare needs at the moment were currently being managed by the State of Illinois, they decided to go ahead and suspend his chemo treatments since he was technically at the end of his life. No need to continue to waste money on that front.

Once Derron was inside of his room, Ms. Cynthia called for some additional staff to help her get Derron moved into a bed and get all of the necessary medical devices running.

“We gon make sure you are as comfortable as possible before you leave and go home to be with the Lord,” Ms. Cynthia said as she made her way back over to Derron.

Just as she was about to temporarily unhook the IV from his arm, Derron grabbed the woman and glanced up at the nurse with a vicious but obviously scared stare. “I want my MOMMY!” Derron growled. Ms. Cynthia jerked back for a second and then snatched her arm away. “Ohhh, boy, you a fighter, I see. I got you baby. I’m gonna go get some more sedatives and tranquilizers.” And she did just that. Moments later, she came back into the room, loaded Derron up with some drugs and got his ass in a deep sleep.

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“Oooh, girl, we got a new client down here. Boy, I almost had to go off on his ass. He gon try to grab me like he was some ghost or zombie.” Cynthia was sitting at her desk trying to organize the mound of files in front of her. She grabbed Derron’s medical file and opened it. “Such a shame he ain’t got no family though,” she said. She was talking to Pauline, one of her co-workers.

“What’s his prognosis?” Pauline asked. She was a hefty, brown-skinned woman as well. In fact, Cynthia and Pauline favored each other in both shape, complexion and face. Only difference was Cynthia had a low buzz cut and Pauline had on a cheap blonde lacefront. Both were decked out in nurse scrubs.

“Girl, they said he got like a few weeks at the most,” Cynthia replied as she looked down at Derron’s medical file. She pulled up another file she had prepared and just as she was about file away the documentation, she noticed something. Derron’s last name on her file didn’t match the one that had been given to her by the medical assistant who accompanied Derron here. Her file read had Derron’s

correct name. The other file didn't. For a second she didn't think much of it. She just thought it was a rare but possible typographical error. But then she was curious enough to examine both files side by side and that was when she realized something was fundamentally different between both sets of paperwork. Derron Harris was born 1/23/1972. Derron Harrington was born 3/24/1983.

"What the hell?!?" Cynthia bellowed and instantly clutched her mouth.

"Girl, I think they gave us the wrong paperwork! I think they gave us someone else's file. Got two different birth dates on here and what not."

Pauline spun in her seat and said, "Damn! Girl, you better call them folks and see if you even got the right patient."

"Shit, who you tellin?!? That's what I'm about to do right now!" Cynthia paused for a moment and clutched her stomach. "Actually, I gotta take a shit. Girl, that Harold's Chicken running right through me! I hate going to that nasty ass Harold's on 79th! I told yo ass we should've gone to the Harold's on 87th!" Cynthia then quickly shot up from her seat and ran to the closest bathroom she could find. A bad case of diarrhea had her completely forgetting all about Derron and the possible mix-up. And it would prove to be a fatal mix-up.

Later that night, Derron was loaded up with a lethal cocktail of pain killers. He passed away. Weeks later he was cremated.

About the Author

QUAN MILLZ is the profound and prolific writer from the sizzling streets of Miami, Florida. Now residing between Chicago, Illinois and Los Angeles, California, he's known for his gritty, graphic and gut-punching urban tales that depict the real and rawness of black urban life.